

# Singing the Lord's Song *in a Strange Land*

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A CALL FOR RESILIENCE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

BY BISHOP JANICE RIGGLE HUIE | OCTOBER 2018







## PROLOGUE

I first learned about resilience from my father, a South Texas farmer. When I was about six or seven years old, one of my favorite activities was to be invited by my dad to go out late in the afternoon to check the cows. We were in the worst of the 1950s drought. Everything was dry and brown. Wide cracks revealed deep fissures in the earth. It was as hot as the blue blazes.

At that time, Dad rented some land across the road from where we lived. Perhaps as much as a hundred acres was in cultivation. The rest was in brush – thorny, scraggly, parched brush. Probably no more than 30 skinny old cows roamed that pasture looking for anything green; Dad burned prickly pear for them to eat.

**FROM MY DAD, I LEARNED ABOUT CLARITY OF PURPOSE AND COURAGE. I LEARNED ABOUT TAKING RISKS, FAILING, AND TRYING AGAIN. IN A TOUGH SEASON OF LIFE, I SAW RESILIENCE FACE TO FACE.**

The rule for going with Dad was “Be still and be quiet.” If you didn’t follow the rule, you didn’t get asked again. Of course, the pickup wasn’t air conditioned, so the windows were rolled down to catch the afternoon gulf breezes.

One afternoon we were there in the pasture – sitting and looking. Dad asked me, “Janice, what do you see?” It seemed obvious. I said I saw brush – black brush, bee brush, cat claw, mesquite, huisache. I knew each variety by its common name. There was silence from my dad. Then I said I saw a jack rabbit – I had seen one as we drove in. Again there was silence from my dad. It wasn’t hard to figure out that none of those answers satisfied the response he was seeking. Finally, I blurted out that I saw a rattlesnake. Even though I hadn’t seen one, I knew they were out there. When I cautiously looked over toward Dad, I saw two little furrows between his eyes, and I knew it wasn’t just because I said I saw a rattlesnake when I didn’t actually see one. The air was still and quiet.

To this day, I don’t know what came over me; but, finally I asked him, “Dad, what do you see?” He looked out over that thorny brush, skinny cows, and scorched earth. “One day, Janice,” he said, “this will all be green grass. The grass will be so tall that it will reach the cow’s bellies. We will put a tank in over there.” He pointed to a little depression in the land “so the cows and wildlife can have water. We will leave brush in the fence lines for quail habitat. One day, Janice, you’ll see. You’ll see.”



Change came slowly, and many years passed before Dad’s purposes fully became a reality. Sometime after the drought subsided, Dad cleared the brush – except for wildlife habitat – and burned it in big piles. Then he sprigged the soil with Coastal Bermuda, an improved grass for our area. He drilled a well, built a windmill, and dug a tank to provide year-round water for cattle and wildlife. Several times he tried to farm grain sorghum and corn on parts



of the property, but it never seemed to work out, so he expanded the grass and added cattle. Nearly 40 years after our conversation in the pickup, Dad was finally able to buy the land that he had worked a lifetime to restore. **Today, cattle graze on green grass. The tank is full of water. Deer, wild turkey and quail have returned. The story is told and re-told to the next generation.**



Family photo of the windmill, tank and cattle described above. Photo credit Claude Pichot.

**From my Dad, I learned about clarity of purpose and courage. I learned about taking risks, failing, and trying again. In a tough season of life, I saw resilience face to face.**

For some years now, The United Methodist Church, too, has experienced a tough season characterized by uncertainty, rapid change and disturbance. Distrust of institutions, polarization, and volatile discourse have become the “new normal” in the culture. Declining congregations, clashes over human sexuality, and threats of division inhabit our religious conversation alongside an exciting surge in missional innovation, especially among the millennial generation. All these realities are part of the “new normal” in the UMC. Some leaders respond to this season with discouragement and stress; others greet it as a fresh opportunity for learning and a renewed focus on the mission of God.

Father Richard Rohr writes, “Transformation more often happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart. The pain of something old falling

apart – disruption and chaos – invites the soul to a deeper level. It invites and sometimes forces the soul to a new place because the old place is not working.”<sup>1</sup> I believe that we are experiencing just such a time in The United Methodist Church. The reality of diminishing congregations and the possibility of division within the denomination disturbs and grieves both pastors and laity. We do not want to be here. Yet, this experience of loss and uncertainty may force us to listen more carefully to God’s desire for the world and to respond to Christ’s call with fresh forms of faithfulness and vitality. The Apostle Paul describes our unwelcome situation this way: “It is when I am weak that I am strong.”<sup>2</sup>

**This paper invites you into a conversation around resilience. Along with purpose and courage, it is one of the leverage issues on which institutions and congregations will live or die into the future.** What is needed to enlarge the capacity of United Methodist pastors, congregations, annual conferences and the denomination to become more resilient? What do we need to learn? Why? What is the relationship between purpose and resilience, humility and resilience, courage and resilience? In what ways does our current absorption with uniformity and control diminish our resilience? Why is it important to face the losses that come with change? Why is it so important for United Methodists to lean forward, act courageously and reclaim our creative DNA? What are practices that expand our capacity for curiosity, imagination, innovation, and risk-taking in the hope that God will make all things new?<sup>3</sup>

I hope you will join me in engaging that conversation. **We begin with a brief overview of our current context, a time of anxiety, uncertainty and accelerating change, and then focus on the resilience of the pastor. Next we turn to resilience in the congregation. Finally, we will look at resilience in the annual conference and denomination.**

## OUR CONTEXT

*Dr. Blair Sheppard, head of the business school at Duke University, uses the acronym ADAPT to describe our current context: **Asymmetry, Disruption, Age, Populism and Trust**.<sup>4</sup> In the last two decades, each of those cultural trends has had significant consequences for the UMC.*

By **Asymmetry**, Sheppard refers to widening wealth disparity and the erosion of the middle class.<sup>5</sup> Although we didn't begin in this way, the UMC has been a solidly middle-class church in the U.S. for at least the last hundred years. The shrinking of that economic group in our congregations leaves a significant gap in the leadership core of both clergy and laity. At the same time, it is an invitation to re-imagine and rebuild our model of mission and evangelism.

By **Disruption**, Sheppard points to the interruption of current business models with new ones and the blurring of industry lines.<sup>6</sup> Ten years ago, who would have dreamed that consumers would buy Whole Food groceries from Amazon that would be delivered to their door? For at least the last two decades, most congregations have continued to organize themselves around an attractional model of ministry, one that says “come” into our building and participate in our community. It is a model that worked well in a predominately church culture. However, as an increasingly large percentage of the population identifies as “none,” the attraction model has become less and less effective. In addition, our economic model continues to assume that religious philanthropy is primary. Today, thousands of non-profits compete for the charitable dollar. Perhaps most significant of all, UM pastors were trained to take care of the people in the church to which they were appointed. As congregations age and decline, pastors are being asked to experiment, innovate and focus more of their time and energy on reaching people in the community. Quite naturally, current congregation members experience a sense of loss of pastoral presence, and they often resist such a change. Often they are quick to remind their pastor that they are the ones paying the bills. Resilience calls for new learning on the part of the pastor, congregation and church hierarchy as well as large measures of humility, courage, risk-taking, and patience.

By **Age**, Sheppard describes the demographic pressure on business, social institutions and economies.<sup>7</sup> The generational gap in the UMC is particularly pronounced. The average age of a Texan is 33.8. The average age of UM pastors in Texas is 57. Pew research identifies the average age of UM laity nationwide as 56. This age discrepancy – more than a full generation – has significant implications for the future of the UMC. Worship preferences differ. Increasing clergy retirements lead to a shortage of trained clergy leadership.

Lay leadership is diminished. Furthermore, most of our current UMC congregations are predominately Anglo or African American with a few predominately Hispanic congregations. Anglos are already a numerical minority in Texas, and the remainder of the U.S. is rapidly becoming multicultural. The UMC has few models of successful multicultural ministry. These gaps invite us into “improbable friendships” and much deeper listening to persons different than ourselves.

By **Populism**, Sheppard points to the **breakdown in global consensus and increase in nationalism**.<sup>8</sup> The UMC is a global church, but we have significant national, regional and even local differences regarding the Social Principles, clergy formation, local church organization, and more. Except for the flexibility offered Central Conferences, all parties are expected to conform to the one *Book of Discipline*, regardless of their context. Recent changes to the *Book of Discipline* have sought to legislate a greater level of uniformity and control by adding new mandates. In response, individuals, congregations and even annual conferences have moved to ignore such directives and govern as they believe is most effective and faithful in their context. **This new reality invites United Methodists to consider more thoughtfully the role of context and the polarities of: loosening/tightening; rigidity/flexibility; and control/nimbleness.** What beliefs or values are truly “core,” and which ones are contextual? Innovation, nimbleness and resilience are birthed in a context that offers permission and flexibility, not mandates.

By **Trust**, Sheppard identifies the **declining trust in institutions and consequences of technology and social media**.<sup>9</sup> This shift has significant consequences for the UMC. Apart from UMCOR, Wespath and a few other institutions, the perception of many laity and pastors is that, at best, our general church institutions, including our bishops, are irrelevant, and, at worst, they can’t be trusted. Trust is easy to destroy and difficult to build. In which institutions should we invest going forward? How might we support their resilience?

Pastors, congregations, annual conferences and the denomination are dealing with all of these disruptions simultaneously. Of course, people feel anxious. As a pastor reflected aloud in a recent conversation, “What does it look like to live and do ministry in a time as fractured, volatile and brittle as our own?”

Last year I preached in a United Methodist congregation whose worship attendance has declined over 40% in less than a decade and is now below 100. The remaining saints have considerably more gray hair. There are only a handful of folks under the age of 50. “What is going to happen to us?” one of their lay leaders lamented to me. “I don’t know,” I replied, “but it is a good question, an important question, a question about resilience.”

In almost every gathering I attend, someone asks, “What’s going to happen to the UMC regarding human sexuality, the Commission on A Way Forward, and the Special Session of the General Conference?” The anxiety, conflict, disorientation, and frustration feel almost palpable. “I don’t know,” I usually reply, “but it is a good question, an important question.” It calls to my mind the need for a conversation about resilience.

**Resilience is the work of the prophet.** Nearly 40 years ago, Dr. Walter Brueggemann pointed out, “The alternative prophetic community is concerned both with criticizing and energizing.”<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, it is the task of the prophetic community to show that “the dominant consciousness will indeed end and that it has no final claim on us.” On the other hand, it is the task of the prophetic community “to present an alternative consciousness that can energize the community to fresh forms of faithfulness and vitality and bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God.”<sup>11</sup> Prophetic imagination both names current reality and energizes new life.

Brueggemann was describing the situation in which Jeremiah and Isaiah found themselves, but he could just as well be talking about today. Who will name our current reality today? Who will help us grieve our losses? Who will help us sing the Lord’s song in this strange land? **Who will help us enlarge the capacity of the people called Methodist to fresh forms of faithfulness and vitality?**





## A DEFINITION OF RESILIENCE

*The term resilience carries different meanings depending on its context. In this paper, I'm not referring to resilience as the degree to which a rubber ball bounces back after it has hit the floor or the degree to which a bridge returns to its baseline state after a train hits it. That definition is useful in the field of engineering, but it is not helpful in our conversation.*

Neither am I referring to the resilience of the Olympic ice skater who takes a hard fall, injures herself, and fights through the pain and the rehabilitation necessary for her to continue to be a gold medal contender. That understanding of resilience is admirable, but it is frequently rooted in a self-help approach. Such an individualistic view rarely accounts for the role of family, friends, or the community in the recovery process. For example, Eric Greitens, Navy Seal, Rhodes scholar, and named by *Fortune* magazine as one of the fifty greatest leaders in the world also wrote a self-help book titled *Resilience*. He recently resigned as governor of Missouri in the swirl of an ugly scandal. Resilience is not an individual activity.

**A better understanding of resilience comes from the field of ecology.** Ecologists define resilience as “the capacity of a system or enterprise to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.”<sup>12</sup>

For example, **Yellowstone National Park** is an extraordinarily complex ecosystem. Two hundred years ago, it was a pristine caldera and home to thousands of species of birds, animals, plants, insects and more. Then European Americans arrived by the thousands. A century later, several species of animals and birds were either extinct or almost so. In 1920,



only 40 bison remained in the West. Thanks to wildlife biologists, plant and fish biologists, people management specialists, environmentalists and many more, Yellowstone has become a remarkably resilient ecosystem. Today four million people visit the park annually, yet Yellowstone's natural resources – plants and animals and land – are closer to what the first European Americans saw 200 years ago than at any time since then. Yellowstone is maintaining its core biological purposes and sustaining four million human visitors annually – a dramatic change in circumstances. We can learn from those processes.

**Resilient systems can encounter unforeseen threats, adapt, maintain their core purpose and put themselves back together again.** Writer Nassim Taleb captures a similar concept with the term “antifragile.”<sup>13</sup> Fragile systems are damaged by shocks. For example, the largest giver in the congregation dies, and 20% of the budget came from her. Two major churches withdraw from the annual conference. A jurisdiction elects a gay bishop when the *Book of Discipline* explicitly prohibits it.



Resilient systems withstand shocks and can operate under a wide variety of circumstances. Clear about their purpose, they can discern, create, and discover new ways to accomplish their purpose. Anti-fragile systems, like the immune system or the muscular system, can benefit from shocks. Stress makes them stronger. They become more nimble, flexible, and creative. The more practice systems have in adapting to change, the more resilient they become.

In our desire for continuity and stability, pastors and laity have inadvertently “fragilized” many of the systems within the UMC. In the Texas Annual Conference (TAC), I visited many churches that had not changed much in 50 years. Everything around them had changed, but the congregation had not changed – except to grow older. Year after year, they became more fragile.

**Resilience practice is rooted in humility and courage.** Humility is required because we don’t know what we don’t know, and yet we must learn what is next and find the courage to step forward. It often takes many failures before the next step is clear. Humility is also needed because we are human beings in community with other human beings, and we recognize our own frailty and sinfulness as well as our goodness as children of God. Paul admonishes, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.”<sup>14</sup> Such humility requires listening deeply to God and to one another. It calls for a rich self-knowledge and openness to the possibility that we ourselves are in error. It means acknowledging that mistakes will be made, sin confessed, forgiveness offered and forgiveness received.

Courage is required because, as Rabbi Jonathon Sacks points out, “Conventional wisdom is not always wise.”<sup>15</sup> A willingness to challenge the prevailing consensus calls for courage. Moreover, we face incomprehensible complexity and volatility, and yet we must have the conviction to move forward as we believe God is leading. Gil Rendle helpfully points out, “Courage is knowing to be more afraid of not being able to move the church toward its missional purpose of changing people’s lives and transforming their communities than to be afraid of our own anxiety and loss of familiar comfort as we face change.”<sup>16</sup> It calls for a willingness to “look for adaptive gaps and ask disturbing questions”<sup>17</sup> and the perseverance to find a way through the obstacles that will be encountered. Courage is needed to transition to a United Methodist culture that will experiment, tolerate failure and accept messiness and loss.

From his prison cell in Tegel, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer called circumstances such as these “boundary situations.” He was a pacifist who determined to take part in a plot to kill Hitler. He knew the costs. He also resolved that he would not spend his time or mental energy playing out worst case scenarios. He used his emotional awareness and discipline to concentrate on how to move forward, how to take the next step.<sup>18</sup>





## RESILIENCE IN PASTORS

*The hardest change is to change ourselves. If pastors can't adapt to this new world, we can't expect the leadership of the congregation to adapt. If the leadership can't adapt, the congregation won't adapt. If congregations don't adapt, annual conferences will struggle. As annual conferences struggle, so will the denomination. "To present an alternative consciousness that can energize the community to fresh forms of faithfulness and vitality and bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God"<sup>19</sup> is the work of resilience, and it is deeply difficult work.*

Some of the most helpful research on the personal resilience of pastors has been conducted by Dr. Matt Bloom at Notre Dame University and funded by Lilly Endowment. Bloom's most recent findings were published in 2017 in a paper titled "Flourishing in Ministry; Clergy, Ministry Life and Wellbeing."<sup>20</sup> He writes, "Flourishing happens when ministry is a life-enriching rather than life-depleting experience." He identifies four interrelated and interacting dimensions as **the key building blocks of flourishing in ministry: daily happiness, self-integrity, thriving and resilience.**<sup>21</sup>

**Happiness** is based upon one's personal subjective experiences and evaluation of life; daily happiness is cumulative. **Self-integrity** means having a strong sense of self-esteem, self-worth and a sense of respect and self-dignity. People with strong self-integrity are often described as being "comfortable in their own skin." Self-integrity enables people to develop healthy long-term relationships. **Thriving** involves experiencing meaning and significance in our lives. It consists of three key elements: an overarching system of beliefs, values and virtue; a sense of contributing toward important purpose(s); and strong, positive connections with other people.<sup>22</sup>

Bloom defines **resilience** as our personal "capacity to adapt, change, and respond to life's challenges, and our capacity to grow, learn and to develop new capabilities and capacities."<sup>23</sup> Resilience plays a key role in responding to the changing world around us. Resilient people can respond effectively to challenges or crises and are not diminished or damaged by such experiences.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps, most importantly, they have a strong, internal drive to learn more about themselves, so they can become better persons.

**Bloom identifies three self-regulatory capacities of resilience: self-awareness, self-reflectivity, and self-control.** Self-awareness is the ability to be attentive to one's own feelings, thoughts and actions. Self-reflectivity is noticing what is going on inside and around us, and the role we have played in those goings-on. Taken together, **self-awareness and**

self-reflectivity are sometimes referred to as “emotional intelligence.” Self-control is our ability to change things in ourselves and in the world around us and to discern what and when to attempt those changes.<sup>25</sup> As pastors increase their capacity to control their impulses, manage their desires, make good choices, focus on what is important, and set and achieve important life goals, they strengthen their resilience.

These four dimensions are interconnected. When one dimension increases, it tends to boost or build up others. The reverse is also true. Weakening in one area tends to cause decline in the others. Bloom uses the phrase, “**ecosystems of wellbeing**”<sup>26</sup> to capture the social interdependencies that shape our wellbeing. These ecosystems include the people we live and work with and the groups and organizations that create and shape our environments. Their congregation, annual conference and denomination are key elements in a pastor’s ecosystem.

Bloom notes that pastors live in a world of high “switching costs.”<sup>27</sup> A pastor’s day rarely comes in a well-ordered flow, and is often accompanied with interruptions. A pastor may move from a finance meeting to a family dealing with illness or death to leading a Bible study to participating in a building committee to working with the mission team to imagine more creatively how they can make a difference for good in their community. Each task requires a different work approach, emotional attentiveness and skill set. Consequently, ordinary pastoral leadership itself calls for a high capacity for resilience.

To “ordinary” pastoral leadership are now added the uncertainties and disruptions inherent in the deep changes re-shaping our culture and congregations. Despite the best efforts of church leaders to keep the focus on the mission of the church, the approach of the Called Session of the General Conference in 2019 followed by the regular 2020 General Conference has heightened anxieties and threatened division. Almost certainly there will be losses: congregations, pastors, laity and perhaps annual conferences. In such a context, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

**It is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, for an organization to become more resilient than its leader.** Congregations need resilient pastors to deal faithfully with the uncertainties and changes washing over them and to enlarge their capacity for resilience. Conferences need resilient bishops to help pastors and laity grieve their losses, discover new possibilities for life, and strengthen their capacity for resilience. In times such as these enlarging both our own capacity for resilience and strengthening the resilience of others will create new dimensions of gospel faithfulness in spite of adversity.

**Three essential practices enhance and enlarge a leader’s capacity for resilience.** Bloom reminds us that isolation can be devastating for physical and mental health. **Developing deep**

**personal relationships with family, friends and colleagues forms a web that strengthens us during tough times.**<sup>28</sup>

In addition, a network of thoughtful persons can serve as conversation partners, encouraging a pastor to think through challenging issues and vet new possibilities. Pastors willing to develop friendships with two or three people outside their “tribe” may discover insights about themselves and their context that only an “outsider” with “fresh eyes” can perceive. The letters of the Apostle Paul demonstrate the value of such practices. Nearly every one includes words of greetings, appreciation, care and concern for specific individuals. Paul’s relationships with these persons are a key part of his “ecosystem of well-being.”

**Second, Bloom reminds us that resilient people know how to anchor themselves – to distinguish role from self, to seek reflection and renewal.**

For Christians, that anchor is often a time of daily prayer, meditation, self-examination and spiritual reading. It is a time to dwell in the presence of God. Historically, the people of God have anchored themselves in faith stories and songs of identity, purpose, courage, and hope. Those stories and songs grounded them in uncertain times. As the people of God prepared to enter the Promised Land, the writer of Deuteronomy taught them the narrative that would ground them in their new home: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien...” (Deuteronomy 26:5-11) A Jewish child asks at the Seder dinner in celebration of the Passover, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” and the family tells the story of the Exodus. The Psalmists wrote poetry: “By the waters of Babylon there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” (Psalm 137) The apostles re-told the stories of Jesus. At every Eucharist, Christians re-tell the gospel account of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Stories – told and re-told – create and sustain powerful narratives of resilience.

To expand their capacity for resilience between now and the 2019 General Conference, the Florida Conference cabinet, with the leadership of their bishop, decided to ground themselves during this next year by reading and praying weekly one chapter from Second Isaiah, one chapter from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, and Romans 8. They chose Isaiah 40-66 because Isaiah is reminding a people who have lost their homeland that God is still with them and that God will make all things new. They chose Philippians because Paul writes his most joyful letter about the love and grace of God from prison where he may well be awaiting execution. They chose Romans 8 because it continually reminds the listener that “nothing can separate us from the love of God.” **For a year, they will preach, lead Bible studies and do the work of ministry anchored in these faith narratives of identity, purpose, courage, and hope.** They believe that such a practice will not only expand their own capacity for resilience, but the resilience of their congregations and pastors as well.



**Third, resilient people invest in learning.** They look at what is going on inside themselves and in the world and ask, “What can I/we learn from this?” They join with others to create learning organizations. Clergy peer groups in which pastors choose to participate are some of the most significant communities of learning for pastors. After almost 20 years of funding pastoral peer groups, Lilly Endowment funded a research project to evaluate the impact of different kinds of groups. Their most important finding: even the worst of the clergy peer groups were better than the best of other forms of continuing education for clergy seeking to improve their ministry. This is the reason TMF invests so heavily in peer group learning.



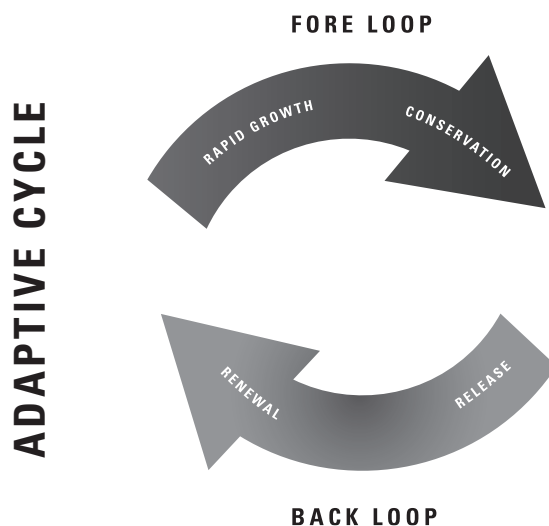
Members of a TMF Peer Learning Group

## RESILIENCE IN CONGREGATIONS

*Over the last 20 years, it was my privilege to be inside the doors of well over a thousand United Methodist churches and to have conversations with pastors and key laity. During that time, I joyfully discovered many congregations – some large, some small, and many in between – that were flourishing. They were worshipping God in engaging and life changing ways and making a difference for good in their community. Less happily, I experienced many more fragile churches – the ones just keeping their heads above water. Sadly, I experienced congregations that were dead or dying.*

Much of the change occurring in congregations is cyclical. It's the aging of congregations, changing demographics in the community, and a shifting economic base. Resilient systems can encounter cyclical change and incorporate those changes into their identity. They adapt. They can even encounter significant shocks and put themselves back together again. Non-resilient systems – fragile systems – are damaged by change and shocks. Sometimes the damage is so severe that they cross a threshold and no longer serve the same purpose they once served. Sometimes, they become something entirely different – like a restaurant or a condominium.

Let's return to an understanding of resilience in the field of ecology. **Here is a simple sketch of an adaptive cycle from ecologists Brian Walker and David Salt.**<sup>30</sup>



When an organism is new, like a newly planted field or forest or congregation, growth is usually quite fast. Over time, growth slows and more and more resources accumulate. The plant matures and produces a flower. The forest matures, big trees choke out smaller trees and store energy in large trunks and leafy canopies. The congregation grows, lives are

changed and its members make a difference for good in the community. Simultaneously, the congregation builds bigger and better buildings, enlarges its budget and accumulates resources.

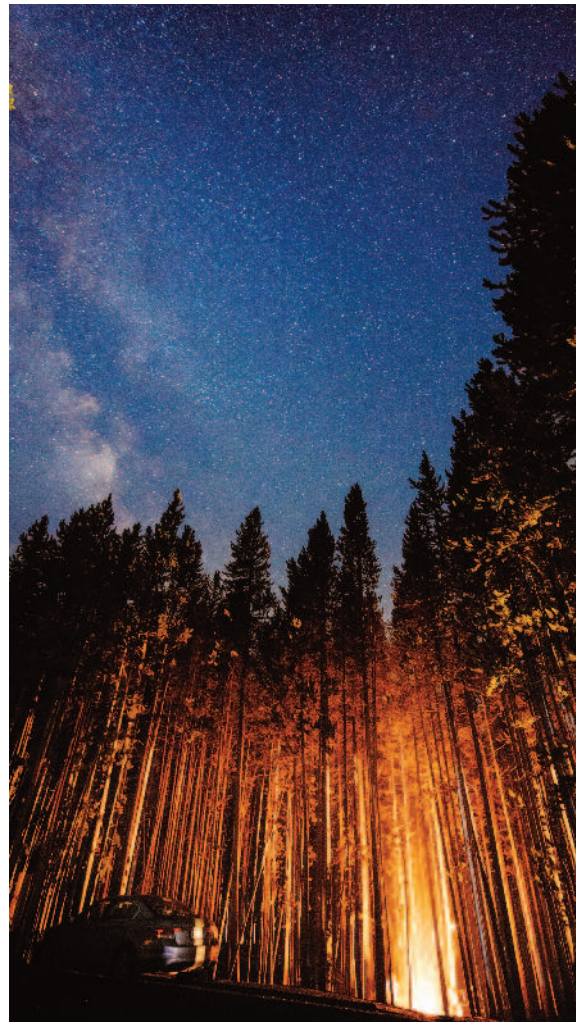
Sooner or later, every organism experiences some form of release of its resources. The flower drops off and produces seed for next year's flowers. The forest has a pest infestation or a fire in which only the strongest, most resilient trees will survive.

Perhaps everything dies, leaving space for new growth. Either a congregation will reassess its purpose for a new day, learn, and adapt to a changing culture or it will eventually close, leaving its resources to begin ministry in another place.

When an organism does not adapt to cyclical changes occurring in its environment, eventually a major disturbance will create significant disruption and often substantial loss.

For example, 2018 is the 30th anniversary of the fires that consumed nearly a third of Yellowstone National Park. During the previous century, the forest service had a policy of putting out all forest fires – those started by naturally occurring events like lightening as well as those started by humans like campers. However, fire is a natural part of a forest cycle. With fire suppression as policy, the normal adaptive feedback loops couldn't occur. For decades, the forests stayed in the conservation stage. More and more dead wood built up.

Finally, in an abnormally dry year, the Yellowstone forests virtually exploded. The additional wood fueled heat-driven winds and fires continued until the snows fell. Today, those burned areas are some of the most beautiful areas of Yellowstone. However, the cost of the delay in adapting to a naturally occurring cycle was enormous in both money and human lives. The good news is that the park service learned, and their learning was networked to other forests. Today the forest service rarely suppresses naturally occurring forest fires unless they threaten human lives or buildings.





All living organisms are subject to these kinds of changes. That includes congregations. For example, the community around a congregation changes, but the congregation remains essentially the same, and no longer reflects the neighborhood. It continues to worship God, conduct Bible study, care for the sick, and maybe even care for the community, but along the way, the congregation is becoming less resilient and more fragile.

In the life of a congregation, certain patterns and behaviors increase and support resilience. Other patterns diminish or discourage resilience. **What follows is the story of two congregations – one large and one small. In reading their stories, notice the behaviors that increase or decrease the congregation’s capacity for resilience.**

**The first congregation was planted in a growing upper middle class suburb outside of Houston in the late 1970s.** The conference purchased land directly across the street from the new high school. Early in the life of the congregation, there was sexual misconduct involving the pastor, and the congregation struggled for several years. Then the bishop appointed a “straight as an arrow” pastor who worked 60-70 hours a week to re-establish trust and rebuild the congregation. He almost left the ministry, but the church re-gained its momentum and began to grow rapidly. It added worship services, developed a youth program and wonderful choir ministry, and more. It hired staff who formed the core of its leadership. The congregation eventually topped out at just over a thousand in worship.

In the succeeding two decades, the neighborhood continued to grow, and became much more diverse. At the high school graduation, when the names of the students in the National Honor Society were called, the majority were Asian. A Hindu Temple was built not far away, and then a mosque.

The decline in the youth group was an early hint that something was wrong. The school next door was overflowing and had to be supported with portable classrooms, but the youth group was shrinking year by year. The youth ministry leader was the same person who had been hired when the church was young, and she was doing the same good work she had done for years – only now the youth group was very close knit and much smaller. The Senior Pastor and the SPRC discussed what was happening. “We probably need to make a change,” said one. “She’s been to many training events.” “But, she’s our friend,” a second one said. “We’ve known her for years.” “My child is happy,” said a third. “There will be an uproar in the church if we make a change.” “She will retire in a few years,” said a fourth.

And so it went in almost every area of the church’s life. The laity did what they always had done: Bible study, prayer ministries, care ministries, community outreach through ecumenical

institutions in the area. They paid their apportionments every year. The bishop appointed a wonderful pastor who was excellent at taking care of the saints, near retirement, and had no intention of rocking any boats. Everybody was happy. The congregation grew older. The neighborhood was young. Over the next few years, the worship attendance slowly drifted downward to 900 and then 800. Finances became a concern, but they paid their apportionments. It dropped to 700, then 600. The leaders deferred expensive maintenance.

A small group of laity, some of whom had been members for years and some of whom were new, began to talk with each other. “What is happening here?” they inquired of one another. They began to ask questions, uncomfortable questions. Questions that people didn’t want to answer. Someone wondered aloud, “Who can help us think differently?”

With the blessing of the Church Council, the church created a team to continue to ask hard questions about their current reality and to imagine a better future. They invited the school principal from across the street to talk about the school. They read books together. They invited a consultant to come alongside them – not to tell them what to do, but to keep them focused on better questions. They asked one another, “What is our purpose now?” “Why are we here?” “To what is God calling us?”

Over time, as they became clearer about the purpose of their church and the difference they believed God wanted them to make in the world, the leaders discovered they had more courage than they knew. It was hard. Sometimes change occurred slowly. At other times, it moved quickly. After the long-time youth leader was encouraged to accept another job, more than half of the youth group walked out. Nonetheless, the leadership held steady in the face of disappointing some of the youth, and a new youth director was brought on who began to engage kids both outside and inside the church.

Following the retirement of the senior pastor, a new pastor was appointed who began to draw the distinction between being a member of the church and being a disciple of Jesus. Ministries were begun to encourage disciples to meet their neighbors – the people who lived near them. The staff began to look more like the people who lived in the neighborhood. A worship service aimed at younger adults was begun. The church had to add more parking.

Then another crisis crashed in – the unexpected death of a beloved associate. Clear about its purpose, the leadership grieved, worked with the conference and moved on. When they celebrated their 40th anniversary several years ago, that congregation was worshipping well over 1300 and had started another campus that they hope will be multi-cultural.

**Some behaviors diminished and discouraged resilience.** For example, in contrast with their early beginnings, over time, members began to value their relationships with one another over the purpose of the church. The mission of God slowly receded to the background and was replaced by longtime friendships and care for those who were already members. There was an increasing disconnect with the neighborhood, and a lack of awareness or an unwillingness to deal with changes around them. The leadership was reluctant to live with discomfort, and courage to change was in short supply.

**Other behaviors increased and supported resilience.** For example, some of the leaders – both long-time and new – began to ask questions, particularly about their purpose. What was God asking of them? They demonstrated a willingness to learn what they didn’t know. They invited other leaders to help them ask better questions. They more frequently asked “why?” than “how?” Over time they found the courage to make hard decisions and deal lovingly with loss and disappointment.

**The second church was located in a small community in the piney woods of East Texas.** It was probably 90 years old. The community was once a bustling town with a bright future. However, about 50 years ago, a new highway was built north of their town, and the community slowly dried up. The remaining “town” was a single short street with mostly empty storefronts. The nearest population area large enough to support a Walmart was a town about 30 miles away.

The church’s facilities were built pre-highway when the town was thriving. Today it’s average worship attendance is 12. No one is under 65. For years now, they’ve been served by one part-time local pastor after another. Off and on through the last decade or so, the members would talk about closing, and then decide they weren’t ready just yet.

About a dozen years ago, a recently-retired couple moved into the area. The husband had been a superintendent in a rural school district near Austin. The wife was a retired teacher. They were Methodists so they went to the nearest Methodist Church, the one with a worship attendance of about 12. They too became a part of the conversations about the church’s future.

Simultaneously with joining the church, the new couple set about meeting their neighbors. Among them was a family of grandparents raising their two granddaughters – little girls about six and eight at the time. It was clear this family had few financial resources. The Methodist



couple set out simply to be good neighbors. The wife offered to help the girls with homework. The husband got to know the grandfather. They invited the family over for supper. A friendship developed. In time, the older couple revealed some of the challenges of raising their grandchildren. One Sunday morning, the now-not-so-new couple mentioned the family to their friends at church.

Over the course of several months, one of the saints at church raised the question about whether God might be calling their congregation to provide Sunday School for these two young children so that they could learn about Jesus. The members talked for weeks about such a big decision. After all, it would take all of them working together to be consistent in teaching these children: someone to pick up the children, take them home, figure out curriculum, arrange a teacher rotation, maybe take them to the conference camp. Over time, it became increasingly clear to the 12 saints that perhaps these two children were God's purpose for their church. Otherwise, they would have closed.

By the time I left, the older child was in middle school, the younger one in late elementary. I'd see them now and then at church camp or a district event with a member of the little church. I think they were still learning about Jesus. Maybe I am just hopeful, but I think the congregation was learning about Jesus too – in new and personal ways.

I don't know how long the church will live. The demographics are stacked against them. But I do know at least for now, there is an integrity to their witness that continues to make a difference in the life of two children.

**Notice again the behaviors that diminished or discouraged resilience.** Even in a small, rural community, the congregation was so internally focused that it did not know its neighbors. It took “fresh eyes” to make discoveries. Although the twelve saints were present in Sunday School and worship most Sundays, they had stopped learning or, perhaps, continued to learn the same things over and over. They had long since stopped asking “What is our purpose now?” The saints valued their relationship with one another more than developing a relationship with a “non-traditional” neighbors. For a long time, they were satisfied with living in the past.

**Notice the behaviors that increased and supported resilience.** The shift to adaptive behavior required outside intervention, but intervention by people they trusted. They were willing to experiment on a limited basis; that is, add Sunday School for two children. They struggled with the question of purpose.

Now imagine the congregation(s) with whom you work. To what degree would you describe each as resilient or fragile or with elements of both? UMCOR has a saying, “if a congregation is strong and a natural disaster occurs, that congregation will emerge even stronger on the other side. On the other hand, if a congregation is fragile, it will be more fragile than before the storm or fire or flood. It might even close.

The less resilient a congregation, the more likely a major disturbance will negatively impact that congregation. The less resilient an annual conference, the more likely a major disturbance will negatively impact that annual conference. The less resilient a denomination, the more likely a major disturbance will negatively impact the denomination. One, both or all three might cross a threshold.

Crossing a threshold occurs when there is no or inadequate adaptation to cyclical change, or when a major disturbance changes the purpose of the system, or when a disturbance alters the way a system functions so dramatically that it is no longer recognizable in its previous form. The system “flips” and can no longer serve its core purpose with integrity.

When congregations cross such a threshold, a key issue becomes the use of the remaining resources such as the land and building. Is the congregation willing to give itself away to start a new church elsewhere? Is it willing to give itself away to a sister church who will re-invest in the community and start a second or third site? Rather than face hard, end of life questions with courage, a congregation that stopped adapting may slowly deplete their assets until nothing is left. In that case, no seed remains for future life.

Another name for thresholds is tipping points. A series of data indicators can tell us whether a congregation is near a tipping point or threshold. One point is worship attendance. In a congregation that is mostly middle class, it takes – on average – about 150 people in worship attendance to support a full-time pastor. It’s a threshold number. When a congregation falls below that number, a slide begins that may be impossible to reverse. Staff gets cut. Maintenance is delayed. Programs disappear. Eventually, the congregation will move to a part-time pastor, and so on. Mission in the community disappears. The longer a congregation delays in adapting to the changing mission field around them, the more likely they will reach a tipping point and cross a threshold.

Returning to the Adaptive Cycle Diagram on page 16, one of the UMC’s leadership challenges is that most of our pastors and virtually all our congregations prefer the security and predictability of the front loop. They assume that the future will be a return to growth without the pain of loss, so they continue to conserve resources without adapting. The longer a congregation stays in the conservation phase, the more vulnerable it becomes to shocks and disturbances. Congregations that do not adapt will grow more and more fragile over time.

The back loop revitalizes the system. It releases and recombines resources that were locked up in the conservation phrase. The back loop is characterized by loss, uncertainty, experimentation and innovation. It is a time for learning.<sup>31</sup> For pastors and laity who prefer predictability, security and certainty, working the early part of the back loop is not a pleasant experience, but it is the beginning of renewal. It is a time to experiment, innovate and learn.

### **What are steps that leaders might take to enlarge the capacity of congregations to become more resilient?**

1. **Begin with an attitude of “courageous humility.”** We no longer pretend that we have the answers to “fix” the UMC or our culture. We admit that we don’t know what we don’t know. We enter the “back loop” of adaptive change where what we thought we knew is stripped away and we open ourselves to God’s guidance. We enter a season of letting go in the faith that resurrection is on the other side.

2. **Shift the conversation from how (practice) to why (purpose) and who (narrative).**

In the two previous stories about congregational resilience, both congregations finally entered the back loop. They did it by focusing on purpose. It was not “what do we want?” Rather, “Why did God put us here?” “What does God want us to be and do?” “Who are our neighbors?” “Who among us will act with humility and courage?” “Who will ask disturbing questions of old assumptions?” “Who is willing to experiment and learn?” All these conversations need to be bathed in the study of Scripture, prayer, discernment, and courageous conversation.

3. **Invest in learning. Experiment. Experiment. Experiment.**

Dr. Gil Rendle explains a learning cycle in this way:

- **Describe:** What is current reality?
- **Diagnose:** Study. Pray. What is our purpose? With whom?
- **Propose:** I wonder. What if?
- **Do:** Experiment.
- **Review:** What did we learn?
- **Repeat.**<sup>32</sup>

One of the most encouraging signs of congregational resilience are the experiments aimed at connecting United Methodist people with their neighbors. Frequently initiated by a millennial pastor or a layperson, church leaders are studying, talking, praying and experimenting with new ways to build relationships with people different from themselves. The Florida Annual Conference refers to these experiments as “fresh expressions.” Tim Shapiro of the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis refers to these new forms of faith communities as “divergent church.”<sup>33</sup>



Often these experiments occur in “third places,” gathering points where we spend time with others in community, beyond the social environments of home and work.<sup>34</sup> Third places are usually characterized by the presence of food and drink, accessible space, and few or no economic barriers. “Third places” include coffee shops, restaurants, hiking trails, rivers, yoga studios, dog parks, apartment complexes, colonias, and more. In other words, the church leaves its building and seeks to build relationships with people in gathering places where people who are unfamiliar with traditional church feel comfortable. These emerging ministry expressions are a 21st century version of John Wesley preaching at the mines and in the fields.



Fondren Apartment Ministry in Houston, created by Westbury UMC and led by Rev. Hannah Terry

## RESILIENCE IN THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND DENOMINATION

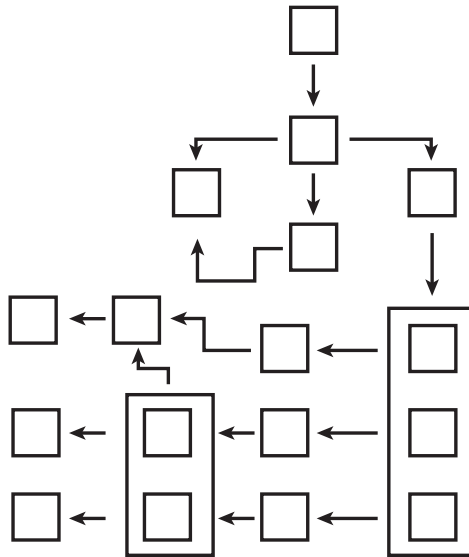
*Let's return to our original question, "What is needed to enlarge the capacity of pastors, congregations, annual conferences and the denomination to become more resilient; i.e., to absorb change and retain its integrity and purpose? In resilience practice, an ecosystem or organism enhances its adaptive capacity in two ways: by improving its ability to resist being pushed past critical thresholds, and by preserving and expanding the range of niches to which a system can adapt if it is pushed past those thresholds."*<sup>35</sup>

All living organisms, ecosystems and large organizations are composed of a diverse array of elements and relationships that interact frequently and are often unpredictable. For example, pastors and congregations live inside the much larger ecosystem of the annual conference and the denomination. In these larger systems, the number of potential relationships expands exponentially. Further, the UMC is a global church that lives inside the various cultures that surround it, further expanding potential relationships.

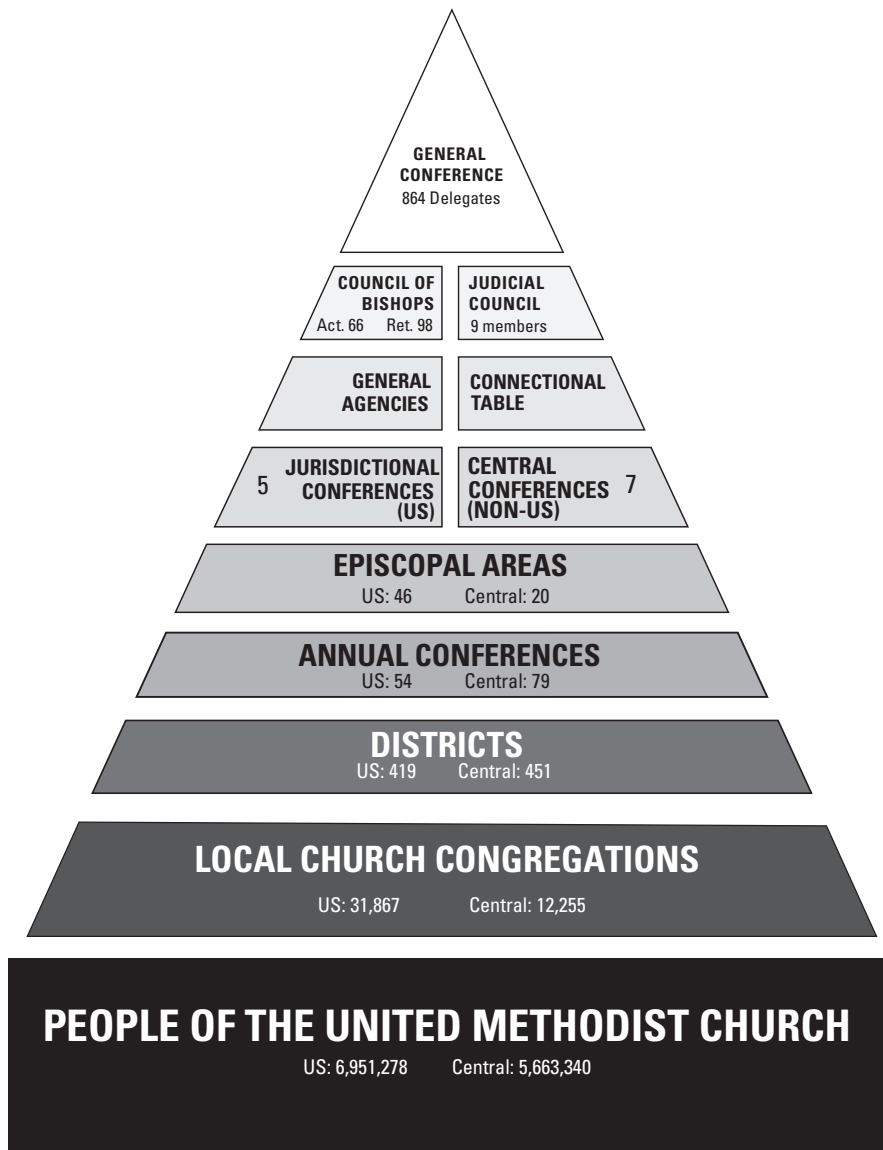
**Our current UMC organizational structure was conceived and adopted in 1968,** following at least three decades of cultural cohesion, consolidation, and high trust in national institutions. It was shaped, in part, around the model of the U.S. government with legislative, judicial and executive branches related to one another through a check and balance system outlined in the UMC Constitution. Simultaneously, the UMC sought to accomplish its mission by adopting the most leading edge organizational model of its day: a complicated linear design.

**On the following page is a sketch of a complicated linear organization taken from General Stanley McChrystal's book, *Team of Teams*.<sup>36</sup> Below it is a sketch of the similar structure of the UMC.**

**COMPLICATED**



## UNITED METHODISTS: A CONNECTED CHURCH





This familiar organizational structure can have many individual parts and layers, but they are joined to one another in relatively simple ways. For example, it is the basis of the assembly line. It was the organizational structure that won World War II. Decisions move up and down the chain of command. While a complicated system can have many layers, it is predictable in its process. Even when we don't like its outcomes, it is secure and orderly. It is controlled by rules, procedures and policies. When someone wants to make a change, they seek permission from the layer above them, and sometimes from the layer below them. A complicated, linear organization undergirds continuity and functions well in a season of stability.

This organizational pattern relies on robustness and/or redundancy to make it stronger. Robustness is typically achieved by hardening the assets of a system – making them tighter and stronger. As Andrew Zoll notes, “The Pyramids of Egypt, for example, are remarkably robust structures; they will persist for many thousands of years to come, but knock them over and they won't put themselves back together.”<sup>37</sup>

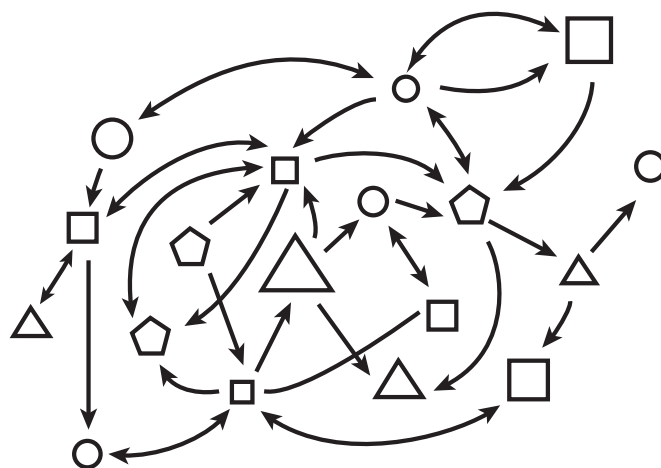
Over the last 40 years, the General Conference has chosen to deal with the issue of homosexuality by hardening (tightening) the UMC position. Initially, the General Conference placed language in the Social Principles stating, “all persons are of individual worth, but we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider it incompatible with Christian teaching.” Successive General Conferences tightened the language to be more specific and to give it the force of law. For example, “self-avowed, practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve The United Methodist Church.” Prohibitions against officiating at gay marriages or conducting them in local churches were added. Violating the rules became a chargeable offense. This tightening or hardening was intended to make the UMC's position more robust. Then, in a relatively brief span of time, some pastors, bishops and even entire annual conferences “knocked over the Pyramids”. These leaders defied the rules, presided at gay marriages, conducted weddings in UM churches, and ordained and appointed gay pastors. Resilience practice would suggest that adding more rules or even dividing the church will not re-build a consensus about sexuality that no longer exists. Recognizing reality and “loosening” the UMC position makes space for a change in understanding both Scripture and current practice that has already occurred. This polarity of tightening and loosening applies in many other areas of UMC life.

Robustness through redundancy is typically achieved by developing backup systems so that if one part of the system fails, another system takes over. However, backups are expensive and are of little use in contexts that call for flexibility and adaptation. For example, in 1968, the UMC approved thirteen seminaries for the training of its pastors. That redundancy played a useful role in a season of ample resources, strong enrollment and ordination as the primary

pastoral model. In a time of limited resources and changing pastoral leadership models, one may ask whether such redundancy serves to make the UMC more resilient or whether it simply uses resources needed for other purposes.

**A different kind of organizational culture surrounds the UMC today. Rather than complicated and linear, it is complex and networked. Here is another sketch from McChrystal's book.<sup>38</sup>**

## COMPLEX



Complexity occurs when the number of interactions between components increases dramatically and the interactions become unpredictable. Multiple networks can interact with one another around a common purpose. Al Qaeda used this structure against the U.S. military after 9/11. McChrystal wrote later, “Our forces were the best trained, best equipped, and best led troops in the world, and none of that seemed to matter. We were losing the war against Al Qaeda.”<sup>39</sup> However, the U.S. military adapted and learned to create networks and team structures in the fight against Al Qaeda and ISIS. **Interacting teams and networks are highly resilient structures which incorporate tight feedback loops, quick learning and rapid response.**

Especially in our early years as a denomination, the UMC’s complicated, linear structure served us well. Apart from the Roman Catholic Church, we are the only truly global denomination. We are diverse geographically and ethnically here in the U.S. We are diverse in points of view, worship styles and much more. We engage in making a difference for good in rural areas, towns, cities and nations all over the world. In the U.S. we remain the largest mainline Christian denomination.

**Today, however, one can argue that the entities most influencing the future of the UMC are not displayed on a UMC organizational chart. They are caucuses functioning as networks: Good News, Confessing Movement, Reconciling Ministries, Love Prevails, Wesley Covenant Association, MARCHA, and BMCR. Large churches have a network. Rural ministers have a network.**

Each network is built around a common purpose, bringing together people who agree with that purpose. Within each group, people trust with one another. They are not so sure of the folks in other networks. From that perspective, U.S. Methodism reflects elements of the larger culture of tribalism in the U.S. today: the polarization between red and blue.

One of the key adaptive challenges for conferences and the denomination is learning to work with a general church and annual conference structure that assumes compliance and uniformity with little consideration for context. Laid on top of the formal structure is a complex system of various networks claiming that they represent the “real” UMC. Those networks are nimble and adapt quickly. Annual conferences and the denomination are struggling to adapt to the changes swirling around them.

Looking across the denominational landscape, I believe that annual conferences will adapt much more quickly to these new realities than the general church. Unfortunately, the general church is fettered with numerous constraints. Some are found in the *Book of Discipline*; others are policies and practices that have hardened over the years. Still others are woven into the culture of the general agencies. The distance between diverse mission fields and the general church seems like a chasm, and local leaders, especially in the United States, develop the impression that the denomination is always “one step behind.” In an environment of reduced budgets and frequent criticism, general agencies become reluctant to experiment, innovate, and learn. As a culture of risk-aversion at the general church level increases, its capacity for resilience decreases.

Annual conferences have natural advantages for expanding their capacity for resilience. They are more closely aligned with their congregations, particularly their large congregations, who have been adapting to change for many years now. Annual conference members, especially clergy, know each other in more contexts than simply belonging to a caucus, network or board. They are members of peer groups, covenant groups, mission teams, and learning groups that engender a culture of trust even though individuals may disagree on certain issues. Bishops and conference leaders have the flexibility to convene teams, network groups, and cohort learning among pastors on behalf of mission, learning, and mutual spiritual growth and accountability. Those networks can multiply. Several annual conferences have a history of being nimble, experimenting, tolerating failure and trying again. These conferences will learn more quickly. As they discover new forms of adaptation, other conferences will follow them.



Annual conferences also have the capacity to imagine and create a “mixed ecology.” One of the significant elements of a resilient system is diversity. Resilient systems are typically simple at their core and diverse at their edges. Picture the structure of DNA or a human cell or a coral reef. Increasing the diversity of a system’s constituent parts ensures the widest set of possible responses to disruption. Annual conferences that intentionally develop a “mixed ecology” of sizes of congregations – small, medium, large, fresh expressions and non-profits as well as mixed forms of clergy leadership including bi-vocational, lay supply, local pastors as well as deacons and elders are likely to adapt to unanticipated changes more quickly.

In a time when the culture is increasingly polarized and some conferences are tempted to become organisms representing only one point of view, it is wise to remember that the strongest conferences over time are likely to be those who welcome a diversity rooted in trust in Christ and deep love of one another despite their differences.

Annual conferences also have the capacity to identify, develop and deploy what Andrew Zoll calls “translational” leaders<sup>40</sup> and Gary Gunderson refers to as “boundary leaders.”<sup>41</sup> These leaders play a critical role, frequently behind the scenes, in connecting people, constituencies, networks, perspectives, knowledge systems and agendas into a coherent whole. They rely on personal relationships, beliefs, values, trust and cooperation.<sup>42</sup> In a county seat town, for example, translational leaders might be those who can call a community meeting to deal with a crisis. In a city, a translational leader might be someone who can facilitate “improbable friendships” between recently released juvenile offenders and patrons of the fine arts museum because all of them love poetry. At TMF, we refer to those persons as “edge” leaders. When “center” leaders are connected with “edge” leaders, both groups are stronger and learn more quickly than when either works alone. These leaders continually collaborate to make a difference for good in their community.

As with congregations, certain patterns and behaviors diminish and discourage annual conference resilience. Other behaviors increase and support resilience. The most resilient annual conferences are not necessarily the largest or the wealthiest, but they do share some common characteristics. They are clear that the conference’s purpose is to serve the mission of the church – to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world – and not the other way around. They over-invest in the young – from kids in the community (for example, Project Transformation) to next generation pastors (for example, Advancing Pastoral Leadership). They constantly cultivate next-generation pastoral leadership and often use some form of an apprentice model in which their strongest pastors invest in the most talented next-generation pastors.

Resilient conferences know that millennial generation leaders, both clergy and lay, are often eager to create new ministries in their communities, and they support their courage and risk-taking with both advocacy and appropriate funding. They are willing to be flexible in developing new pathways to leadership (Bi-vocational, Lay “pioneers,” etc.) Resilient conferences have a high tolerance for failure, and use those situations to learn. They spend less time talking about the “good old days” and more time imagining God’s desires for the future.

Leaders in resilient conferences work constantly at developing a culture of trust among clergy and laity – especially among those who hold different opinions than their own. With their own humility and courage, they create “brave space” where others can express themselves with both humility and courage. With resilient episcopal leadership, all these qualities can easily be enhanced and supported. Even without it, lay and clergy leaders can work together to keep the conference focused on its core purpose in the midst of dramatically changing circumstances.

## AFTERWORD

*The Psalmist's question is our question: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"<sup>43</sup> I believe that UM leaders will need all the clarity of purpose, courage and resilience we can muster as we work with pastors, congregations and conferences who are holding on tightly in the conservation mode because they fear the losses of adaptive change. We will need clarity of purpose, courage and resilience as competing networks swirl around United Methodists, particularly in the decisions regarding human sexuality. We will need resilience ourselves as we experiment, fail and try again to adapt to the new realities around us.*

The Psalmist's question is answered many times over by the prophets, but by none more marvelously than Isaiah, "For thus says the Lord: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like an overflowing stream: and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you: you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."<sup>44</sup>

I remember my father clearing brush, planting grass, drilling a well and digging a tank on behalf of a better future. These are now the tasks of the people called Methodist. We claim them as the people of God have claimed them before us in the promise that God will make all things new.



"Today, cattle graze on green grass. The tank is full of water. Deer, wild turkey and quail have returned. The story is told and re-told to the next generation."



## QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- Tell a story about a time you experienced adversity, uncertainty, disturbance or loss. What personal practices strengthened you and contributed to your resilience in moving through the tough season toward a brighter future? What practices or patterns tended to keep you “stuck” in anxiety, uncertainty and loss?
- Reflect on the cultural trends represented by ADAPT: Asymmetry, Disruption, Age, Populism and Trust. In what ways are these trends impacting your community, congregation and annual conference? How are you dealing with them?
- Reflect on your congregation. What behaviors diminish your congregation’s capacity for resilience? What behaviors enlarge its capacity for resilience? Who are the prophetic voices speaking “holy discomfort” at the way things are and offering a vision of God’s future? Who helps you listen for God’s mission? Describe a time your congregation began a new mission. What happened? What did you learn? Who helps you learn? Who are the courageous voices?
- Reflect on your annual conference. What actions is it taking to increase resilience in pastors, lay leaders and congregations? What actions accelerate learning, clarity of purpose, missional innovation, collaboration and courage among diverse people?
- Reflect on the General Church. What actions is it taking to adapt to a changing environment? What actions could you take and/or support?
- What is the work that you need to do now?

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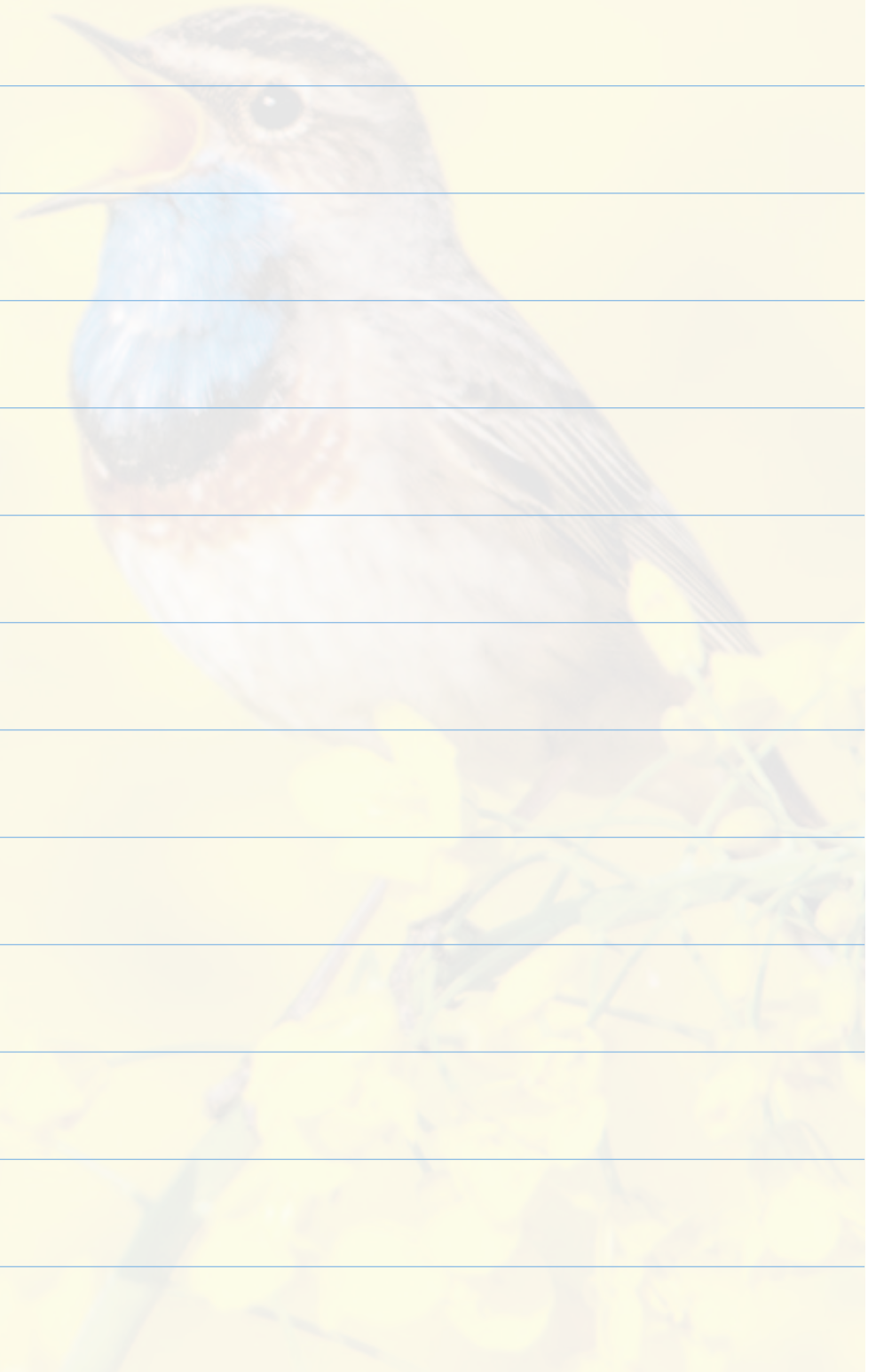
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# notes





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