Missiology of Public Life as Resiliency

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DOI: 10.7252/Paper.000085
Have you ever wondered why some missionaries seem to thrive in the face of unimaginable adversity while others seem to succumb to despair and leave the field prematurely? This question has grabbed hold of me, and lead me to consider everything from assessment to training to care; all critical pieces of the puzzle. In recent years, I’ve come to believe that resiliency can play an organizing role in assessing, training, and caring for missionaries.¹ Resiliency refers to the process of bouncing back from adversity. As I was contemplating the theme of our conference, Missiology of Public Life, I realized it too could be understood within this construct of resiliency. In this paper, I will: 1) outline a model of missionary resiliency, derived from the literature; 2) reflect on the spiritual and theological implications of this dynamic of resiliency; and 3) offer suggestions of how to apply this model of resiliency to our conference theme, a Missiology of Public Life.

**A MODEL OF MISSIONARY RESILIENCY²**

Resiliency was first used as an engineering term to refer to “the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress.”³ In a new world made possible by abundant and affordable steel, it’s obvious why resiliency would be of interest to the engineers of the railroads and skyscrapers. It should be no surprise that later the term would also pique the interest of psychologists who saw an apt metaphor for psychological resilience as “an individual’s ability to properly adapt to stress and adversity.”⁴

Emmy Werner was one of the earliest psychologists to study resiliency. In the early 1970’s, she began a 40-year longitudinal study with 700 impoverished children from Kauai, Hawaii; these children had been raised in adverse conditions, often amidst poverty and alcoholism. Before her research, it was largely assumed

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¹ See ResilientMissionary.org for current resiliency promoting reflections, services and resources offered to missionaries.

² The purpose of this section is to layout a basic framework to conceptualize missionary resiliency. Therefore, only a few examples are provided with each section as way of illustration.

³ http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_resilience
that childhood risk factors determined adult outcomes. But she discovered that one third of the children did not show destructive behaviors later as adolescents. She labeled this group resilient and thus began the study of how people can respond very differently to adversity. A slew of research has followed in recent decades, especially among children and military personnel.

It should be of no surprise that those concerned with the care of missionaries would also be interested in resiliency. Over the years, a number of articles, books, and conferences have all addressed missionary resiliency. We can compile this collective wisdom into a model of missionary resiliency. The model is simple, composed of three parts: Adversity, Resiliency Promoting Responses, and Possible Outcomes. We’ll explore each in turn.

RECEIVING ADVERSITY

Two of the matriarchs of the missionary care world, Drs. Lois Dodds and Laura Mae Gardner, in their research found that the average level of stress for a missionary was 600% higher than for the average American; this stress hit a climax within the missionaries’ first term of service. They believe that the expected stressors of cross-cultural adjustment and external change (which the majority of cross cultural training addresses) were not the major cause of attrition, but rather the unexpected forces that demand fundamental adaptation to a missionary’s core sense of self and worldview.

While there are varying degrees and types of adversity, all adversity by definition reveals the missionary’s limits. As Dodds and Gardner’s experience confirms, it is impossible to overcome adversity without significantly adapting. Sometimes this means changes in mindset or habit; other times it means shifts in relationships or acquiring new resources. Almost always it involves multiple changes on multiple levels. This is a critical point: who they are, how they act, and what they have, is not sufficient to overcome the adversity they face—they must adapt.

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5 Worsley, Lyn. The Resilience Doughnut Model A model showing the interaction of external resources that build individual resilience.
7 Ibid pg 145.
In this sense, the most nodal adversities that missionaries face are the unforeseen ones, those unexpected moments that truly test their resolve.

Karen Carr reminds us that pastorally, it’s essential to help missionaries accept that the normal responses to adversity, such as depression, anxiety, or post traumatic stress are just that—*normal* responses which are in no way incompatible with resiliency.8 Furthermore, resiliency must be understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed quality.

**RESPONDING IN RESILIENCY PROMOTING WAYS**

As you might imagine, the type of adversity we are describing impacts the totality of a missionary’s life: physically, emotionally, spiritually, relationally—everything. Therefore, a multi-layered response is essential. When we imagine the resilient missionary, David Livingston may come to mind. But this caricature of the rugged lone individual misses the mark. When taken as a whole, the current literature suggests that missionaries respond to adversity in three spheres of their life: *Individual, Relational, and Communal*. Research is needed to identify the specific responses that directly correlate with missionary resiliency.9

**Resiliency Promoting Individual Responses**

First, missionaries can respond to adversity individually in ways that promote resiliency. A foundational response is identifying the meaning associated with the adversity. Knowing that some greater good or purpose may rise from the ashes of adversity makes the experience of and recovery from adversity far more manageable. This is why, as Karen Carr suggests, clearly knowing one’s calling is an essential task in building personal resiliency.10

Another mindset that promotes resiliency is optimism. Linda Janssen defines optimism in its broader use within Positive Psychology as “active in its

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8 As I’ve spoken about my research into resiliency, almost unanimously people respond by acknowledging that they wish they were more resilient. I suspect that the majority people are far more resilient than they give themselves credit for.
9 God willing, research I intend to contribute to through my thesis in 2017.
10 Ibid pg 94.
orientation and focused on the future. It includes finding meaning, setting goals, taking action, conveying gratitude, maintaining perspective, discovering hope and incorporating humor into our lives.”

Interestingly, the need for optimism is balanced by the need for lament. Drs. Frauke and Charlie Schaefer, in their development of spiritual resources for resiliency\textsuperscript{12} suggest multiple ways to know God’s presence and than to respond with lament, forgiveness, and grace. Lament is a process of turning toward God in trust with vulnerable honesty—it is a bringing of our negativity before God rather than directing our negativity toward God. Meaning making, optimism, and lament reframe adversity in a context of hope and represent active, rather than avoidant stances.

**Resiliency Promoting Relational Responses**

Second, because adversity reveals personal limits, individual responses are often insufficient. Rather, missionaries need to turn toward their core relationships for support. For many, this often involves their immediate family, host culture friends, and ministry team. Karen Carr suggests that both attitudes and beliefs, as well as knowledge and skills, can be gained through training which promotes this relational resiliency.\textsuperscript{13, 14} The attitude and approach of caregivers is extremely important; Carr notes how Job’s friends attempt to offer support in the face of his adversity but fail; what is critical for healing in the face of adversity is acceptance and empathy. Such relationships are marked by trust, which needs to be built long before it is needed.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. pg 75-85.
\textsuperscript{14} One common complexity is that adversity can come from or isolate a missionary from their family and/or ministry team. For this reason, sufficient resources and effort need to be invested into team and family cohesiveness and trust building before adversity is faced. Furthermore, missionaries may need resources from outside caring organizations and professionals capable of offering the needed relational support.
\textsuperscript{15} From my perspective as a marriage and family therapist, I believe that many of the relationship skills necessary for a couple to secure lasting love correspond to the same relationship skills necessary for a successful resiliency promoting relationship among
Resiliency Promoting Communal Responses

Third, in addition to the immediacy of relational and individual responses, communal responses also play a pivotal role in missionary resiliency. The plans, policies, and procedures, as well as the organizational culture of sending and receiving agencies and bodies, all have direct impact on a missionary’s experience of adversity and their capacity to respond. For example, mission organizations can foster cultures that promote wellbeing or foster poor self-care and eventual burnout. They can allocate resources to missionary training and care or expect missionaries to just tough it out on their own.

Realizing the best possible outcome of altruism and authenticity

Adversity leads to various outcomes. Certainly missionaries may be crippled by adversity. Often, they are forever changed by the adversity, and go on to live functional and productive lives. However, it is actually possible to bounce back from adversity changed for the better, with the best possible outcome appearing to be altruism. Justine Allain-Chapman in her work in *Resilient Pastors* suggests that adversity actually creates the context for altruism. In other words, altruism isn’t possible without first facing adversity. In personal correspondence she shared:

“From adversity to altruism was my ‘original’ bit, in my doctorate. People who had had very troubled backgrounds spoke about healing through helping and so I looked at that and saw that there was this process in them and in the biblical material. So often we seem to stop at the encounter with God, when we read

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people’s stories, but people like Moses encounter and go on to help, or take up pastoral responsibility, and they find their previous circumstances are used by God. It’s sanctification and not just salvation, a continuing maturing which involves becoming more whole, I reckon.”18

Karen Carr develops the work of Yvanne Dolan to refer to this same growth process in terms of three stages: Victim, Survivor, and Celebrant.19 She describes the celebrant stage as “characterized by fullness, joy and authenticity.” It is as if suffering removes the scales from their eyes, and they can now see the suffering of others in a way that compels them to respond. As way of illustration, can you name a missionary saint who did not first face significant adversity? I cannot.

**Resiliency as Skill and Buffer**

This paper has proposed a model of understanding missionary resiliency informed by the literature as 1) receiving adversity which reveals a missionary’s limits, 2) responding individually, relationally, and communally in ways that promote resiliency, and 3) realizing a best possible outcome of authenticity and altruism.

It’s worth noting that resiliency-promoting responses do not represent qualities that are ether present or absent, but rather are skills that can be taught, practiced, and mastered. Furthermore, resiliency functions similarly to exercise: the more you do it, the better you become at it. This means resiliency can help you face a current adversity, which functions as a buffer against future adversity. Consider one of the challenges you’re facing in your ministry today. Do you think you could have handled that challenge at the beginning of your ministry? I certainly could not have. I hope that this framework has made clear that promoting resiliency is a more promising paradigm for missionary care than simply reducing attrition.

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18 email correspondence 5/10/2016.
**Resiliency as Sacrament and Sanctification**

This three step framework for resiliency helps illumine Paul’s strange words in Romans, that Christians “rejoice” in their suffering. We can endure, but how can we rejoice in suffering? Paul goes on to say, “…knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” (Romans 5:3-5, RSV). What Paul is addressing here is the spiritual implications of resiliency. We could translate this into our model of missionary resiliency and say “suffering produces resiliency and resiliency produces altruism, and altruism produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” I’d like to develop this to show the sacramental dynamic of resiliency which results in our sanctification through participation in the divine life of the Triune God.

The sacramental dynamic of resiliency is best illustrated through the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we offer bread and wine and receive something entirely different: the body and blood of Christ. However, this dance of receiving and offering extends far beyond the Liturgy. It begins not with our offering to God, but with God’s offering to us. God gives to us water, salt, wheat, grapes, and even yeast floating aimlessly through the air. These are symbols of the totality of creation offered to us. We receive these gifts and through our effort turn them into something entirely different—bread and wine which we offer back to God. God receives our offering of bread and wine and again offers something different back to us, the body and blood of Christ—himself. We receive Christ as our very source of life, and as we leave the Liturgy and journey into the world, we too offer ourselves back to God through the living out of our life in the context that we find ourselves.

This Eucharistic dance is allegorical to the resiliency model we just developed. Resiliency begins with the receiving of adversity. Next, the missionary, through their own effort responds to that adversity in ways that promote resiliency individually, relationally, and communally. This response is an offering to God. God receives their offering and offers back to them something entirely different—a
capacity for authenticity and altruism which they in turn receive and offer back in a life lived for the sake of others.20

Without the eyes of faith, none of us would look at bread and wine and believe, “Divinity is present there,” or at adversity and say “The abundant life I really want is there.” Yet, both are true, for this is the foolishness of the Gospel—If you want to save your life, you must lose it, if you want to live, you must pick up your cross and follow Christ.

Second, this sacramental dynamic of resiliency also reveals that the best possible outcome, an authentic and altruistic life, is actually an avenue toward sanctification through participation in the divine life of the Triune God.

Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection represent the ultimate act of resiliency. In the Orthodox mindset, Jesus’ crucifixion is the conquering of death by death. That is to say the joy of Easter Sunday does not nullify the sorrow of Good Friday, rather it reveals that the cross—an instrument of death—is in reality a life-giving cross. Our experience of adversity as essential for resiliency reveal this same reality.

Furthermore, for many missionaries their experience of adversity becomes an appropriation and even participation in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. They come to know Jesus by sharing in his suffering through their suffering. Through the experience of healing prayer, they may realize that not only have they participated in Jesus’ suffering, but Jesus has participated in their suffering. He has co-suffered with them. This perichoresis or interpenetration is an encounter with the Incarnate God—Jesus who is Emmanuel. Any theology of resiliency needs to begin here—not solely with the sovereignty of the transcendent God whose ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9), but first with the empathy of Emmanuel, with the God who “empties himself of all but love”21 to radically join us in our actual experience.

Through our “deaths” and “resurrections”—our adversity and resiliency, we participate in the very life of Christ. Furthermore, this participation in the life of Christ cannot be divorced from a participation in the mission of Christ which is a participation in the Missio Dei. Jesus says in John’s Gospel, “Peace be with you.

20 Justine Allain-Chapman notes that the church in her wisdom has given us seasons of adversity such as Great Lent which help us to develop our resiliency.
21 Charles Wesley, 1738. And Can It Be That I Should Gain? Psalms and Hymns
As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21, RSV). Ultimately we are sent by Christ just as Christ was sent by the Father. That is to say, we too participate in the Missio Dei, we too have an active role in the Meta-Narrative of God’s redemptive work.

The argument I'm putting forth here, is that our participation in the Missio Dei is actualized principally through our offering to God of our adversity and resiliency—a life of successive “crucifixions” and “resurrections.” I believe this is the essence of Jesus’ command that those who would become his disciples must deny themselves daily, pick up their cross, and follow Him (Luke 9:23). If we stopped here, we would be at risk of a sadistic heresy of asceticism for asceticism’s sake. We find a created tension in Jesus’ command that the heavy laden should come to him for rest (Matt 11:28) and that he came that we might have life abundantly (John 10:10). Here is perhaps one of the greatest paradoxes of the Christian life; resiliency cannot be separated from adversity for life comes through death.

Therefore, resiliency is not only a helpful paradigm for the practice of missionary care, but it is deeply rooted in the foundational dynamics of the spiritual life—a sacramental participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Missio Dei empowered by the Holy Spirit. In this way, a missionary’s vocation is not simply a proclamation of justice and justification to those who are unsaved as those who are saved, but also the actual process by which they themselves are being saved.

**APPLICATION TO MISSIOLOGY OF PUBLIC LIFE**

The theme of our conference is a missiology of public life. As I was reflecting on our theme from the context of my study of missionary resiliency I realized that a missiology of public life is actually an act of resiliency in response to the adversity of globalization. There are countless examples of the dramatic impact of globalization which have impacted every area of our life and every arena of our world. In this sense, we can frame globalization within our model of resiliency as an adversity that reveals our limitations.

How do we respond to the adversity of globalization in ways that promote resiliency? Certainly the desire to forge a missiology of public life is essentially a meaning making task. As such it represents a primary resiliency promoting
response. If we think about a missiology of public life within our model of resiliency than we can further identify other individual, relational, and communal responses that will help to shape this missiology of public life. I’d like to suggest three ways that a missiology of public life, seen as a resiliency promoting response to the adversity of globalization, might manifest.

First, a missiology of public life needs to be grounded in optimism in the broadest sense of the term. Our mission is a participation in God’s Mission—the God who not only invites us to be co-laborers, but also to become His beloved and to share in his divine life. This is the nexus from which our missiology of public life flows. Second, our missiology of public life needs to lead us to develop a relational response that takes seriously the potential of kingdom partnerships that are marked by oneness rather than sameness. In our globalized context, efforts to partner with others, and especially the “other” will form the networks that are best positioned and equipped to respond to the adversity manifest through globalization—none of us is sufficient alone. Finally, we need a communal response that looks in two directions. First, it needs to be ecumenical, looking around and making space for the diversity of voices which create the choir of Global Christianity. Second, it needs to be orthodox and look back in fidelity with the Universal Church. These two movements, of solidarity and fidelity, are essential if we are to forge a missiology of public life.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has sought to develop a model for missionary resiliency derived from the current literature. This model begins with receiving adversity which reveals a missionary’s limits; then responds with resiliency-promoting responses at the individual, relational, and communal level; and finally realizes a best possible outcome of an authentic and altruistic life. Next, I suggested that this model has important spiritual implications as a sacramental participation in the divine life of the Triune God. Finally, I proposed that our missiology of public life is an act of resilience in response to globalization. Furthermore, that such a missiology must maintain an optimism rooted in the *Missio Dei*, be attunes to the capacity of Kingdom Partnerships, and be communal—listening with one ear to the diversity of voices that mark Global Christianity and with the other in fidelity to the Universal Church.
Missiology of Public Life as Resiliency

Our model of missionary resiliency ended with a promise of the best possible outcome. I’d like to end this paper with the same for a missiology of public life. I believe that a missiology of public life that responds with robust resiliency to the adversity of globalization may be an offering which God can receive and transform into our best possible outcome. Imagine if this generation might be the church that fulfills Jesus’ prayer, “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:20-21 RSV).

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