

LEADING IN COMPLEXITY

At least nine trends are creating a new ecosystem that will require adaptive leadership from pastors, lay leaders and denominational partners.

1.



DEMOGRAPHIC

Not only are Millennials the largest adult generation in terms of sheer numbers, they are also the most ethnically, culturally and spiritually diverse (unlike many of our churches).

2.



SOCIAL

Young people are generally going through the shaping experiences of adulthood at later ages than did previous generations—yet most of our churches are designed with families in mind.

3.



ECONOMIC

The economic pressures on middle-class and working families are being passed on to local churches, and the financial and ministry implications are immense.

4.



VOCATIONAL

The landscape of work is shifting toward a gig-oriented, multi-careering, freelance terrain, and there is profound need for a robust theology of vocational discipleship.

5.



INSTITUTIONAL

People get the information they want, when they want, for the price they want to pay. "Disintermediated institutions"—including churches—are no longer the sole mediators of knowledge, and pastors no longer the chief authority.

6.



LEGAL

Particularly when it comes to holding historically orthodox beliefs about human sexuality, Christian institutions are at increasing risk of running afoul of the law.

7.



DIGITAL

The "screen age" requires adaptive approaches to community and discipleship. "Digital Babylon" is an always-on, hyperlinked, immersive culture where Christians must learn to live and thrive as exiles.

8.



MORAL

Society's moral center is shifting away from external sources of authority (the Bible, Christian tradition) to the self: You look inside yourself to find what's best for you.

9.



SPIRITUAL

"Nones," or the religiously unaffiliated, are the fastest growing religious group in the nation. Nominal, cultural Christianity is no longer the "default position" of Americans—and this reality is challenging the Church to reevaluate faith formation.

RESILIENCE IN COMPLEXITY

by David Kinnaman

Culture is under constant reconstruction. The nine trends on the previous graphic are examples of powerful culture-building trends that are changing the way we live and lead. The team at Barna is committed to studying and assessing how these kinds of movements intersect to create complexity. Our objective is to help spiritual influencers understand the times and know what to do (see 1 Chron. 12:32), and we believe it's impossible to understand our times without getting a handle on today's trends.

Let's think together about how three of the preceding trends—the *institutional*, *moral* and *spiritual*—affect ministry. For pastors, the disintermediation of institutions means the traditional role of churches as a source of spiritual authority is increasingly removed from the minds of today's citizens. As society's moral center shifts away from external sources toward self-fulfillment, pastors' knowledge of the Scriptures and Christian orthodoxy appears irrelevant or even extreme. And the waning of nominal Christianity's cultural power means that, in order to follow Christ, Christians must swim against the current rather than going with the flow. In other words, if living as Christians is increasingly countercultural, then *pastoring* those Christians is a hard swim upstream, too.

While pastors are as important as ever in Christ's kingdom, in a society undergoing spiritual reconstruction they seem less significant. In the past, a career in ministry might have appealed to any leader who sought recognition and respect. Today, however, Christian ministers are as likely to be ignored and insulted as they are to be admired and revered. It's not a job for the thin-skinned or the weak of heart.

It's a job for the resilient.

After more than three decades studying churches in the U.S. and elsewhere, we at Barna believe the Christian community has, at times, focused too much on raising up strong, almost heroic leaders. But in their excellent book *Team of Teams*, General Stanley McChrystal (Ret.) and his coauthors contrast *robust*—another word for strong—with *resilient*. The pyramids at Giza are robust: big, impressive, immovable, unchangeable except by increments or an act of God. Yet given enough firepower, a single person could wipe them off the face of the earth. A forest, on the other hand, is resilient: at first glance, more vulnerable than the pyramids to a devastation-level event such as a wildfire or attack by an invasive parasite. But wait a decade or a century, and the forest is likely to have recovered—and the soil beneath the trees to be richer, as well.³²



As church leaders in a time of unparalleled complexity, I believe we must seek to be more like forests and less like pyramids, able to adapt to or recover from whatever cultural wildfire or superbug comes along. In the introduction to this report, I touched on five traits of resilience uncovered by *The State of Pastors* research. A resilient leader:

- Prioritizes their own spiritual, emotional and physical needs
- Views challenges realistically
- Learns from their mistakes
- Considers alternate perspectives and new processes
- Expects that God is at work even in adverse situations

How can we cultivate the inner resources and outward behaviors that bear the fruit of resilience? Here are a few ideas, along with some discussion questions to get you thinking and your team talking.



SELF-LEADERSHIP: BEING A RESILIENT PERSON

In many ways, pastors are already some of the most resilient humans on the planet. *The State of Pastors* shows that most church leaders are content in their home life, joyful in pursuit of God, managing their finances well, maintaining mental and emotional equilibrium, open to learning new things and confident as ever in their ministry calling. Pastors and those who support them, whether relationally or institutionally, should be encouraged that their work thus far is paying off, and renew their commitments to fortify these areas of strength.

Yet the research also raises some red flags. The number of pastors at some risk of burnout, relationship troubles or spiritual problems are cause for concern. Because their calling is so central to their identity, it can be tempting for pastors to rank the business of leading and serving ahead of soul care and intimate relationships—but doing the former well (leading, serving) depends on prioritizing the latter (soul care, relationships). As Pete Scazzero says in his Q&A with Barna, “Our first work as spiritual leaders is to live *congruently* . . . Our roles and our souls must remain connected; this is our primary work and the greatest gift we can give to others.”

In this age of distraction and celebrity, pastors and their networks of support must consider what it looks like to practice *effective self-leadership*. The “self” in “self-leadership” should not imply that spiritual leaders are or should be on their own—far from it. It’s just shorthand for the inner experiences and closest relationships that make pastors who they are, the fundamental stuff of being human. Amply investing in these aspects of life is effective self-leadership.

- Who is helping you keep tabs on your inner life, including your mental health and spiritual vitality? What do you need in order to grow in these areas?
- How is your physical health? What is one way to take better care of the body that allows you to do all you do, including ministry?
- Are you feeling anxiety related to money? How can you better steward your finances and practice generosity?
- How are things going in your family, in your marriage? What is your next step to deepen or heal those relationships? Who can help?
- Take stock of your friendships—how deep are they, really? What will you do to invest more of your true self into life-giving friendships?
- Who speaks truth into your life and how regularly transparent are you with them? Is better accountability a matter of more frequent mentoring or a different mentor altogether, or both?
- At the heart of personal resilience is intimacy with Jesus—in what ways are you practicing his presence and inviting him to transform your life?



CHURCH LEADERSHIP: CREATING A RESILIENT TEAM

Reviewing the findings from this part of the research, it strikes me that most of the problem areas of *effective church leadership* are best addressed by understanding the difference between technical solutions and adaptive leadership. (Ron Heifetz’s writing on adaptive leadership is must reading for church leaders.³³) Technical solutions are well and good if returning to the status quo is the ultimate goal. A cast and sling, for example, are technical solutions designed to return a broken arm to its former condition. Upon completion of the healing process, everything is “as good as new.” A lot of churches try to solve problems using this mindset: *How can we get back to where things used to be?*

But an adaptive problem is a level up. Its very nature is complex. Amputation of a limb, for instance, requires adapting to a new reality; there’s no returning to the status quo. Adaptive leadership recognizes there is no going back to simpler times; complexity is now reality.

In churches, as in life, there are many technical glitches, but the most vexing problems are adaptive. Yet we often try to fix adaptive problems with technical solutions. Just as an example, we might think raising up church leaders among the next generation is merely a matter of finding that one “perfect” young leader—but ministry succession is not a technical problem.

One of the most significant features of an adaptive problem is that *we must change* in order to face the challenge effectively. Pouring into the lives of younger leaders changes a pastor. So does casting

and living into an expansive vision of what pastoring is and can be. Expanding the leadership team to include gifted young people—and expanding our vision of ministry calling to include the networks where people live and work—will certainly require a senior leader to change.

Another one of those adaptations is learning to lead in the context of teams. More so than ever, churches need to embody a *team of teams* approach. George Barna's work has long highlighted the need for different *types* of leaders to come alongside each other to build great organizations and healthy churches. His book *A Fish Out of Water* describes four distinct aspects of leadership: Directing Leaders, Strategic Leaders, Operational Leaders and Team-Building Leaders.³⁴ Healthy organizations have all four, and since no one person can embody all these qualities, a team is the best option.

"Teams of teams" in your context might mean connecting young and old, paid ministry staff and lay leaders, singles and marrieds, and so on. For many churches it will mean creating more deeply spiritual partnerships—highly focused on prayer, for example—between pastors and elders. Taking nothing away from the importance of God's intention for faithful *individual leaders*, churches need better approaches to solving problems, building disciples and serving our communities *as teams*, not as lone wolves. It's Acts-like work: deploying groups of people into the world for the sake of Jesus.

Relatedly, one of the most glaring challenges facing the Church today is the aging of today's pastors. This is an urgent, adaptive-level problem that will require us to change. Doubling down on a team approach to leadership will help us adapt to this looming potential crisis *and* help us engage young leaders who may be looking elsewhere for opportunities to make a kingdom impact.

Creating better teams is adaptive leadership, and it is an important key to effective church leadership in this era of complexity.

- Is there an area where your mentoring of younger leaders has fallen short? What needs to change to fill the gap?
- What is working well in your church that should be continued or could be enhanced? Who needs to be acknowledged or recognized for their contributions to what's working?
- How could the pastoral staff and elder team become better at problem solving together, distinguishing between technical and adaptive problems?
- What kinds of spiritual, relational or intellectual tools might be necessary to handle more complicated questions and problems?
- Are leaders demonstrating both intellectual humility and courageous conviction? What must change to bring those into healthy tension?
- In what ways have you missed the chance to bring spiritual practices to your team leadership—such as praying as a team of leaders?

- Are you or your team more concerned with preserving your present reality and traditional approach than with adapting together to a complex future?
- How can your team focus on Jesus as the object of your devotion and the purpose of all you do?



CULTURAL LEADERSHIP: FORMING A RESILIENT COMMUNITY

While their cultural influence may never reach that of a C. S. Lewis or a Reinhold Niebuhr, called and committed pastors remain absolutely indispensable. Thanks to the Internet, information is cheap but wisdom is at an all-time premium—and a society hurtling full-speed towards a cliff needs all the wisdom it can get, even if it mocks the worker in the orange vest waving SLOW and CAUTION signs. How can pastors to exercise *effective cultural leadership*?

First, teach your congregation how to engage in meaningful conversations—and model it, too. In order for the Church to be a resilient, effective minority in today's society, we're going to have to get past our conversational barriers. Barna has found that evangelicals are among the most conversationally challenged segments, meaning they feel least equipped to have a meaningful conversation with someone who believes differently from them.³⁵ And as this report shows, pastors admit to feeling unprepared to teach people how to have those conversations.

The discomfort caused by complexity tempts many people to pick a hill, plant a flag and hurl down curses on anyone who doesn't agree, just to feel a little less uncomfortable and a little more righteous. Social media makes this temptation almost irresistible. However, if changing minds and hearts—and allowing *our* hearts and minds to be transformed by Christ—is the ultimate goal, we must find another way. Meaningful conversations happen when we listen, understand, reflect and respond with kindness and conviction. It is nearly a lost art—and is at the heart of evangelism and discipleship—so if you and your congregation can revive the craft of meaningful conversation, people you don't expect will want to listen and be heard.

Second, in an era of complexity, churches can become learning communities. What I mean by “learning” is resilient heart-mind-soul-and-strength formation that makes us new creations in Jesus. The typical churchgoer comes to church fewer weekends per year than in the past, and a few sermons a month are not sufficient to form people in the ways of Jesus—especially not in a culture that pummels people with warped ideas about life and how to live it. In many ways, learning—which includes both knowledge acquisition and practice-making-perfect—is the very essence of Christian discipleship: learning the ways of God; learning to live in light of Christ's rule and reign; and learning to depend on and be guided by the Holy Spirit.

It is remarkable that, despite so much indifference to Christianity and the waning cultural influence of pastors, there is still a strong desire among most people to *learn*. In a complex, accelerated culture, people have many questions. How can your church become a learning community that helps people to develop cultural discernment? Pastors enjoy preaching, which is certainly one essential part of learning. But it's not the only way people today should be formed. Preaching is not sufficient to bring about whole-life learning (heart, mind, soul and strength) in a society of distracted, self-centered people for whom the echoes of Christianity are muted. Don't get me wrong: Preaching is important. But it's less sufficient today to exclusively do the job of faith formation. (Refer to point number one on the importance of meaningful conversations!) Our faith speaks to the everyday issues of life: money, sexuality, relationships, work, race relations, entertainment and so on. And these are topics on which informed Christians—including pastors—can speak meaningfully into today's cultural context.

Third, take the long view. It's far too easy to get caught up in the headlines of the day and begin to believe today's complex crisis is all there is. It's not. The Holy Spirit has sustained the Church for a couple thousand years now and shows no sign of calling it a day. Let's trust the Spirit's sustaining power not to quit, and prepare for the future. What will the North American church need in 50 or 100 years? What institutions or practices should we create or revitalize in order to serve those sisters and brothers of the future? Pastors are ideally situated to plant the seeds, because the youngest members of your church *are* those sisters and brothers of the future—and you are forming them today to lead the Church and the world tomorrow.

- When your church serves your community, how well are you listening? How can you make conversations more meaningful?
- How can we tackle critically important issues—things like race, poverty, sexuality, work and so on—through our churches?
- How can our churches develop rich countercultural patterns of belief and behavior that stand as a witness to society?
- Does your church practice prayer in the pattern of Jeremiah 29, praying for the peace and prosperity of our post-Christian society?
- What needs to change in your thinking about formation and pedagogy in order for whole-life learning to define your church community?
- How can Jesus take center stage in all your church does as you seek to be a counterculture for the common good?

Taking the long view also means believing Jesus when he says the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church we inherited from the apostles. Now *that's* resilience!

