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CULTIVATING THE RESILIENT CONGREGATION:  
THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS AND CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSALS\*

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Luke's account of the calling of Simon centers on an experience of group depletion. When Jesus invites Simon to "put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4), Simon is perplexed and dismayed. His immediate response is to reflect on all of the effort, energy, and time that have already been invested in the activity. He is dismayed because he knows that they have done everything possible to bring in a catch. The experience of this group of fishermen is that they have enacted, to the best of their ability, the craft of casting nets and failed. They were tired, depleted, and weary of trying. Finally, Simon had to describe his perspective to Jesus, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything" (Luke 5:5). The disappointed and disheartened disciples were finding it hard to muster the strength for a new initiative.

Many congregations feel like Simon and his friends. Significant effort has already been expended to promote the ministry. Many committed and dedicated people have worked hard "all night" to ensure that the programs and initiatives of the church go forward. The results have lately been disappointing. While the struggle is evident, the outcomes are not what had been hoped for. Congregational ministry can be difficult, disheartening, and exhausting. Even in relatively good times, congregational ministry can be taxing and depleting. When extenuating

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circumstances or heightened difficulties ensue, the prospects of a flourishing congregation seem to erode. This raises important pastoral theological questions. What makes churches resilient in times of difficulty? Why would one congregation collapse while a church with similar resources, talents, and strengths seems to flourish? Can we identify characteristics of a resilient congregation? And if so, how might we enact the capacity for resilience in any given situation?

#### *Foundations of Resilience Theory*

The word resilience originates from the Latin *resilire* (to leap back).<sup>1</sup> The concept has been in use in a variety of disciplines for the past twenty years, most notably psychology, psychiatry, social work, medicine, engineering, and management theory. In recent literature much attention has been given to defining, analyzing, and sharpening the concept of resilience. If we explore some key definitions used in these various domains, we can isolate the common dimensions for appropriation in congregational studies.

Michael Rutter of King's College, London defines resilience as "the ability to bounce back or cope successfully despite substantial adversity."<sup>2</sup> In more recent years he has modified his definition to a more "interactive concept" where resilience "can be defined as reduced vulnerability to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of a stress or adversity, or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences."<sup>3</sup>

Working in the field of social policy, researchers S. Luthar, D. Cicchetti, and B. Becker say resilience can be defined as "the dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity."<sup>4</sup>

Gill Windle, in a critical review and concept analysis of resilience, offers: "Resilience is defined as the process of

1. Windle, "What is Resilience," 153.
2. Earvolino-Ramirez, "Resilience," 73.
3. Rutter, "Resilience as a Dynamic Concept," 336.
4. Mohaupt, "Resilience and Social Exclusion," 63.

effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within [the organization] and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation and ‘bouncing back’ in the face of adversity.”<sup>5</sup>

Still another definition is offered by M. Bartley et al., when they state that resilience is “the process of withstanding negative effects of risk exposure, demonstrating positive adjustment in the face of trauma or adversity and beating the odds associated with risks.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, from management theory, here is a definition by P. Martin-Breen and J. M. Anderies: “Resilience refers to the capacity of human beings/system/organization to survive and thrive in the face of adversity.”<sup>7</sup>

In reviewing these definitions and the concept analysis offered by researchers in the various domains, we can identify five key features of resilience in the research. Resilience has to do with bouncing back after a difficult situation. Second, a key feature of resilience theory is its linkage with adversity. Third, the focus on resilience is a shift away from “models” and risk theories to an emphasis on strengths, capacity, and competencies. Fourth, research has emphasized that resilience is process-oriented rather than trait-oriented. This helps us to focus on the kinds of processes and means by which congregations might react constructively to difficulties. Fifth, research has demonstrated some of the key defining attributes of a resilient organization or person. These will help us to locate some of the focal points necessary for congregational analysis and action in situations of difficulty.

A brief review of these five elements will help to lay the foundation for our application to congregational situations.

5. Windle, “What is Resilience,” 152.

6. Ibid., 156, citing M. Bartley et al., “Resilience as an Asset for Healthy Development,” in *Health Assets and the Social Determination of Health*, edited by E. Ziglio and A. Morgan. Venice: WHO European Office for Investment for Health and Development, 2009.

7. Abdullah et al., “Resilient Organization,” 319, citing L. Riolli and V. Savicki, “Information System Organizational Resilience,” *Omega* 31, no. 3 (2003) 227–33.

### 1. *Bouncing Back*

One aspect in all of the definitions of resilience is elasticity or “bouncing back” from difficult experiences. Resilience is measured by the ability, given the similar resources of a person or organization, to bounce back, recover, and even thrive after a significant trauma or difficult event. This elasticity does not mean that the traumatic event is any less impacting, but that the organization or individual has developed a capacity to adapt in the face of adversity. In the case of organizational bouncing back, researchers Abdullah, Noor, and Ibrahim have the conviction that, “Resilience looks beyond restoration because it includes development of new capabilities and it is an expanded ability to keep pace and even create new opportunities. Resilience is not just about recovery but focuses on how people cope with complexity under pressure, change and unintended events to achieve success.”<sup>8</sup>

### 2. *Adversity*

Adversity is a second common feature identified in resilience research. Marie Earvolino-Ramirez, in her concept analysis of resilience, states that “Adversity is the single most notorious variable that distinguishes resilience from other social management processes or personality traits . . . Challenge, change and disruption are all aspects of adversity that are noted before the process of resiliency can occur.”<sup>9</sup> Michael Rutter has emphasized in his research that there are always two possible outcomes with adversity. On the one hand “exposure to stresses or adversities may increase vulnerabilities through a sensitization effect or decrease vulnerabilities through a steeling effect.”<sup>10</sup> For our purposes we will want to weigh carefully the steeling effects of adversity in congregational life and ask, what makes one congregation erode in its commitments and withdraw from challenge while another, faced with similar difficulty, is empowered

8. Ibid.

9. Earvolino-Ramirez, “Resilience,” 78.

10. Rutter, “Resilience as a Dynamic Concept,” 337.

to persevere and steel its collective will for a better future? Are there marked understandings of adversity and difficulty that would enable a more resilient congregation?

### 3. *Strengths Approach*

In the social sciences, research concentrated for a long time on negative outcomes and processes, mostly employing the so-called “deficit model.” The work on resilience, however, directs the attention of researchers to positive outcomes and investigates the factors for succeeding in overcoming adversities. Resilience theory moves away from “deficit” models of organizational and personal pathology and towards a strengths approach. Gill Windle states, “Resilience theory focuses on strengths and healthy development despite risk.”<sup>11</sup> In her review of resilience theory in social work, Adrian DuPlessis VanBreda emphasizes this focus on *strengths*. Strengths can be described as “the capacity to cope with difficulties, to maintain functioning in the face of stress, to bounce back in the face of significant trauma, to use external challenges as a stimulus for growth, and to use social supports as a source of resilience.”<sup>12</sup>

This is a key dimension of focus for our study. We will explore the importance of defining strengths, naming competencies, rehearsing successes, and stimulating discourse of congregational vitality and potential. VanBreda sees the “seeds of resilience” in the narratives of potential. This is a core idea for congregational vitality especially in the face of difficulty and adversity.

### 4. *Process of Resiliency*

In study on resilience over the past two decades there has been a notable shift from the idea of resilience as a quality or trait of a person or organization to the *process* of resiliency. Almost all of the researchers emphasize this shift to process and part of our investigation related to this will be to name and identify the key dimensions of congregational processes that can match the

11. Windle, “What is Resilience,” 152.

12. VanBreda, *Resilience Theory*, 200.

experiences of deficit, change, difficulty, or adversity experienced. In particular, researchers Pilar Hernandez et al. focus on three domains of functioning that can enhance resilience: belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication processes.<sup>13</sup> This research, however, is a relative newcomer to the field of study. A cursory review of resilience literature reveals what are often referred to as the three “waves” of research: psychopathology and early childhood development, resilience-based interventions, and organizational/social resilience inquiry. The most recent of these developments and the one most associated with congregational studies concerns the organizational studies of resilience in communities and businesses. From this perspective, the focus is on the resilience of the whole organization or the aggregate of the persons involved. Abdullah et al. identify this when they state:

[An] organization’s capacity for resilience is developed through strategically managing human resources to create competencies among core employees, that when aggregated at the organizational level, make it possible for organizations to achieve the ability to respond in a resilient manner when they experience severe shocks.<sup>14</sup>

### 5. *Qualities Associated with Resilience*

In most of the literature on resilience theory, there are qualities associated with resilience that are important for us to explore. Gill Windle suggests that self-efficacy, hope, and coping are “defining attributes of resilience.”<sup>15</sup> Marie Earvolino-Ramirez, in her concept analysis, identifies the attributes or strengths associated with resilience in some of the most notable theorists in the field (Anthony, Masten, Rutter, Werner, Benard, Garmezy). There are six that are noted by all of these researchers that I would like to use as the pivotal focus for this strengths section: positive relationships/social support, conviction about efficacy in adversity, flexibility, trust in others, sense of humor, and high

13. Hernandez et al., “Vicarious Resilience,” 232.

14. Abdullah et al., “Resilient Organization,” 320–21.

15. Windle, “What is Resilience,” 153.

expectancy/self-determination. We will explore these in relation to congregations and their capacity for resilience in adversity.

*The Resilient Congregation—  
A Congregational Studies Approach*

We turn now to the application of resilience theory in the emerging field of congregational studies. Congregational studies is a relatively new focus within the broader field of pastoral theology. It was formed by a coalition of scholars and researchers led by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, who all share an interest in congregations.<sup>16</sup> Their objectives in developing a multi-framed platform for congregational study were to enable careful thought about congregational life, to facilitate a deeper understanding of the dynamics that animate each individual congregation, and to engage in thoughtful research that would be rooted in the structures, patterns, practices, and experiences of congregations.<sup>17</sup>

A recent study by the Alban Institute of twelve congregations that endured significant difficulties and survived—even thrived—evokes some questions about the factors that might be involved in creating the conditions for such resilience in other congregations. The study included a wide variety of issues: six had faced the trauma of sexual misconduct by their professional staff; seven had high-level conflicts over the leadership of their pastors; some had experienced disasters—two in a cataclysmic fire, another a tornado, and still another a flood *after* a fire.

What this study showed is that, despite significant challenges and difficulties, these churches were resilient. They were able to find a path to restoration and to a new future beyond the situation

16. See Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations*.

17. Ibid., 9: “We invite the reader to think carefully about the nature of congregational life and to enter into the fascinating world of traditions and texts, stories and social hours, committees and ministries that are formed as people of all faiths gather into enduring local communities called congregations.”

that engulfed them for a time. This required attention to God, perseverance despite many hardships, careful listening, calm leadership, effective communication, flexibility, and learned humility.<sup>18</sup> These responses, while common to the churches studied, are elusive in congregational development. In this paper I will explore the root ideas of what a resilient congregation might need so as to accomplish these aims and how to facilitate a resilient congregation.

My starting point is the seminal work of James Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures*. Hopewell's theory of congregations included

his contention that congregational culture is not an accidental accumulation of symbolic elements but a coherent system whose structural logic is narrative. As congregations first come into being, Hopewell argued, they construct a narrative that accounts for their nascent identity. They attract to their fellowship those who want to participate in the unique local drama enacted there. They maintain their integrity against incursions by reiterating their distinct local story.<sup>19</sup>

According to Hopewell, "A congregation . . . uses forms and stories common to a larger world treasury to create its own local religion of outlooks, action patterns, and values. I have begun to see how astonishingly thick and meaning-laden is the actual life of a single local church."<sup>20</sup>

After a year of ethnographic study of two local churches, Hopewell concluded, "By year's end I was convinced that parish life, in these two local churches as much as in my own, was a rich and multilayered transaction that seldom got the description it deserved."<sup>21</sup> He continues, "At a deeper level a congregation is held together by much more than creeds, governing structures and programs . . . it is implicated in the symbols and signals of

18. Nienaber, "Leading into the Promised Land," 2–7.

19. Wheeler, "Editor's Foreword," xii.

20. Hopewell, *Congregation*, 4.

21. *Ibid.*, 5.

the world, gathering and grounding them in the congregation's own idiom."<sup>22</sup>

James Hopewell died before his book was completed. Barbara Wheeler, who took on the task of the final editing of this important volume of congregational studies, offers four key premises<sup>23</sup> in Hopewell's approach:

1. A community of faith has an "ethos" or a "congregational character in a narrative framework."
2. The features of a congregation's character include: style, tone, and moral posture.
3. There is a strong conviction that God works through the narrative of a congregation.
4. A particular language develops in a congregation that expresses views, values, and actions.

If we were to work with these four categories from the perspective of resilient congregations, we might modify them this way:

1. A resilient community of faith has an "ethos" of hopefulness and a narrative that evokes a hopeful view of the world.
2. The features of a resilient congregation include: patience, communion, and perspective.
3. The compelling narrative that fuels a resilient congregation is the resurrection narrative.
4. The particular language of a resilient congregation includes hope-speak, empowerment by God, and humility.

Let's review the implications of these in turn.

1. *A resilient community of faith has an "ethos" of hopefulness and a narrative that evokes a hopeful view of the world.*

The focus on a hopeful narrative is one of the key insights of resilience theory in relation to congregational life. Researchers in resilience theory emphasize the importance of bearing witness to the adaptive capacity of human beings in difficult situations. Telling the stories of how the community has faced and

22. Ibid.

23. Wheeler, "Editor's Foreword," xiii.

overcome its adversity reinforces communal strengths. In one study of a community that had been affected by traumatic assassinations and displacement, the therapist worked with a small group to “develop stories about what had happened before, during, and after the displacement, how they felt and what they hoped for the future.”<sup>24</sup> This collective narrative of hope was brought to a community gathering in order to “restore the collective memory about what had happened and give new meaning about where to go next.”<sup>25</sup>

To become a resilient congregation we must pay attention to our collective narrative, giving careful voice to the hope that lies within us. However, to do this, we must also face up to our disillusionments. Jean Vanier speaks of what he terms “the four great disillusionments of community life.”<sup>26</sup>

The first comes when we arrive. There are always parts of us which cling to what we have left behind. The second is the discovery that the community is not as perfect as we had thought, that it has weakness and flaws. The ideal and our illusions crumble; we are faced with reality. The third disillusionment is when we feel misunderstood and even rejected by the community, when, for example, we are not elected to a position of responsibility, or do not get a job we had hoped for. And the fourth disillusionment is the hardest: our disillusionment with ourselves, because of the anger and frustration that boils up within us.<sup>27</sup>

Resilience has the capacity to face up to these disillusionments and to overcome them with a revised narrative, a narrative that speaks about God’s power, God’s ability, and God’s mission enacted in our midst and despite the appearances of distress in our community. We must hold lightly our ownership of the community of faith of which we are part and allow that, at the core, this is the community that God is making. Our hope needs to reside in God’s ability to enact God’s plan in this time and place.

24. Hernandez et al., “Vicarious Resilience,” 236.

25. Ibid.

26. Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 75–76.

27. Ibid., 76.

2. *The features of a resilient congregation include: patience, communion, and perspective.*

Hopewell's categories of style, tone, and moral posture are crucial for our study of congregational resilience. Earlier we identified qualities of the resilient community. These included positive relationships/social support, conviction about efficacy in adversity, flexibility, trust in others, sense of humor, and high expectancy/self-determination. We can identify key elements of the resilient community in the way the congregation forms and enacts its community identity (positive relationships, social support, trust in others), in the way the congregation sees its future (flexibility, high expectancy/self determination), and in the way the congregation cultivates its posture in difficulty (sense of humor, conviction about efficacy in adversity).

*Patience: high expectations within a modest framework.* In the study of twelve congregations who had experienced significant trauma, researchers identified that "from the onset of the trauma or conflict to the final stages of recovery, was approximately 4.75 years."<sup>28</sup> They go on to encourage persistence within a modest perspective with this encouragement: "Admit that recovery will be long, slow and difficult. Don't be overly optimistic about when it will end." The resilience is in the expectation that things will eventually normalize and that, despite challenges and changes, there will come a time of renewed vitality to the congregation.

Donald Capp's analysis of hope in congregational life is helpful here. He identifies patience as one of the significant allies of hope. Patience, Capps declares, is "not sitting idly by, waiting for some expected outcome to happen, but instead is . . . involved in the outcome."<sup>29</sup> Patience involves determination and tenacity—powerful allies to resilience. For congregations to be resilient, they must exercise this kind of patience that is "determined to do what is in our power to see [our hopes]

28. Nienaber, "Leading into the Promised Land," 3.

29. Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 148.

realized.”<sup>30</sup> The kind of patience that facilitates our hopes is not passive but active. It is the kind of patience that includes steadiness, endurance, and perseverance.

*Communion: trust others who share our journey with us.* Resilience requires a community of trust and relationships that are reliable. By recognizing and affirming the community that has gathered together in the name of Jesus we signal that the abiding hope we share is ours together and not alone. Neil Pembroke reminds us of the communal nature of hoping when he states:

Hope [as opposed to mere optimism] is sustained in a relational context. Marcel (1951) avers that the most adequate expression for hoping is “I hope in thee for us.” For him, the fact that hope is indissolubly bound up with communion is so true that he wonders “if despair and solitude are not at bottom necessarily identical” (Marcel, 1951, p. 58).<sup>31</sup>

Henri Nouwen articulates a most vivid depiction of authentic Christian community when he writes, “Christian community is a faithful fellowship of the weak in which, through a repeated confession and forgiveness of sins, the strength of Jesus Christ is revealed and celebrated. Christian community is the spiritual place where people come together to recognize that Jesus Christ is Lord, a recognition which becomes possible only by a willingness to live in shared vulnerability.”<sup>32</sup>

*Perspective: A reframed sense of hope in adversity.* The resilient congregation is able to reframe the situation that has come to pass. Rather than being consumed by losses and the story of what could have been, the resilient congregation has an abiding conviction about the efficacy of the Spirit’s power in the most solemn difficulties. The impetus is on the openness of the future with God’s leading. Congregations who face difficulty but are

30. Ibid.

31. Pembroke, “Witnessing to Hope,” p. 435.

32. Nouwen, *Peacework*, 102.

not defined by those difficulties have learned to frame their core identity in God. They are not compelled by the urgent need to make a difference, but are rather drawn into what John Westerhoff calls “the difference that God has already made.”<sup>33</sup>

This entails that we commit ourselves to learn and to experience congregational life as an opportunity to grow in understanding, discernment, and maturity. Shapiro says, “Among congregations facing a particular challenge, there are at least a few congregations whose special capacity enables them to function more effectively than others with similar resources and conditions. What is the trademark of this special capacity? This special competence can be summarized as the ability of clergy and laity *to learn together*” (italics mine).<sup>34</sup>

Our perception of what is happening must always be modified by the hidden reality of God’s action that is beyond human comprehension. In depicting his church’s story of transformation and recovery, Pastor Brett Opalinski identifies with the prophet Habakkuk’s words, “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation” (Hab 3:17–18). The congregation of 1,000 members had dwindled to a small gathering of the faithful few. The large facility endowment began to shrink and the bills piled up. This congregation, once vital and expansive, had become a diminished and troubled gathering of a depleted congregation. Through spiritual tenacity and undeterred hope the leadership planned a transition that involved a merger. This was God’s new way for them. Pastor Opalinski notes his observations as he visited the church a year after he had left, “What I saw . . . was a beautiful sight: people working, serving, and worshipping together. There in that newly merged congregation, the fields were slowly producing food again. Long-awaited resurrection had finally come.”<sup>35</sup>

33. Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life*, 35.

34. Shapiro, “Being the Exception,” 41.

35. Opalinski, “When the Fields Yield No Food,” 8.

3. *The compelling narrative that fuels a resilient congregation is the resurrection narrative.*

Eugene Peterson reflects on his journey into pastoral life. He noticed that, as much as the congregation knew about the Christian life and as much as they identified as Christians, there was something missing. On the whole people were engaged but bored. The congregation needed a compelling narrative to re-ignite its passion. Peterson concludes, “After a good bit of casting around, I found the place to begin was the resurrection of Jesus . . . The resurrection of Jesus establishes the entire Christian life in the action of God by the Holy Spirit. The Christian life begins as a community that is gathered at the place of impossibility, the tomb.”<sup>36</sup> He continues on this line, “Jesus’ resurrection launches us into living in community, the holy community—the community of the resurrection is the kerygmatic lift-off for living in the community of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>37</sup>

The resilient community must find its core identity in the resurrection, or as Peterson states it, “We live the Christian life out of a rich tradition of formation-by-resurrection.”<sup>38</sup> The core identity of the community is rooted in the resurrection, and authentic spiritual transformation is rooted in what the Spirit does, “forming the resurrection life of Christ in us.”<sup>39</sup>

I share Peterson’s conviction that this is a defining narrative for the resilient congregation because embedded in the gospel is the dialectic of the cross and resurrection narrative that is the basis of our hope and the foundation of a truly liberating freedom in Christ. Researchers in resilience theory found a correlation between vicarious trauma and vicarious resilience.<sup>40</sup> My

36. Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 228–30.

37. *Ibid.*, 230.

38. *Ibid.*, 232.

39. *Ibid.*, 237.

40. Hernandez et al. state, “In trauma work, the empathic listener is confronted with stories of powerlessness and disruption as well as resourcefulness and adaptation. Both types affect therapists; the degree to which they do is influenced by factors including, perhaps, the length and intensity of the stories” (“Vicarious Resilience,” 238).

point is that this dialectic is also found in the gospel narrative, between the agony, disruption, and powerlessness of the cross, and the power and transformation of life in the resurrection narrative. The dialectic of cross and resurrection is the founding story from which the community of Christian faith derives its capacity for resilience.

At the root of this confidence despite setbacks and difficulties is the power of God. The same power that was at work in the resurrection of Christ is at work in the church today. This dynamic power of God is the basis for all authentic hope about the future of the community that God is making. The power rests in God and God's capacity to make all things new. This is the basis on which the apostle Paul prays continually for the Colossians:

so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. (Col 1:10–12)<sup>41</sup>

*4. The particular language of a resilient congregation includes hope-speak, empowerment by God, and humility*

Hopewell's final point in identifying a congregational identity is to pay attention to the language of that particular community of faith. My contention here is that the language of the resilient congregation will be congruent with the ecclesial expectation of God's empowerment, even in times of difficulty. More to the point, it would be my contention that this is the very language that the Bible uses of the authentic Christian community—the community of resurrection that is reliant on God's power in every situation.<sup>42</sup>

41. All Scripture quoted is from the New International Version.

42. Space does not allow me to develop this point extensively here. However, it is my contention that the language of the resilient community will reflect these core New Testament values as the ecclesial referents of the

This leads me to my third and final movement in this paper, namely, the theological integration of resilience within the larger pastoral theological theme of hope.

Hope has become a galvanizing theme in pastoral theology. At the root of the congregational experience of hoping is, in the words of pastoral theologian Neil Pembroke, “the capacity to envision pathways around a blockage, and the requisite mental strength to keep pushing forward.”<sup>43</sup>

James Wind summarizes research conducted on congregational life in North America by the Alban Institute over the last number of years.<sup>44</sup> He notes that we are living in an era of paradox. On the one hand declining congregations, high levels of clergy burnout and dropout, and tensions in denominational life all indicate a high stress environment for contemporary churches. However, they also note the emergence of “new paradigms for ministry,” “stunning evidence of congregational creativity,” culturally adaptive programming, and the development of healthy alliances. This confluence of challenging congregational situations and resilient responses by churches lead the Alban Institute staff to use the metaphor of *awakening* to describe this moment in church life in North America. Wind states:

Awakenings occur when a society encounters so much change and turmoil that old ways of organizing life break down. Simultaneously, innovators bring forth a whole host of new ideas, new interpretations of old texts and traditions, new moral concerns, and new proposals about how to shape our lives. These awakenings are times of revitalization in which dysfunction and ferment are always intertwined.<sup>45</sup>

Hope becomes the larger theological context in which we understand the functional aspects of congregational life in a complex world. In his seminal work *Theology of Hope*, Jürgen Moltmann sees hope as the fundamental response to any

authentic and empowered community of God. See Phil 2:5–11; 2 Cor 4:7–18; Eph 3:14–21; 1 Pet 3:8–12; 1 John 4:7–21.

43. Pembroke “Witnessing to Hope,” 436.

44. Wind, “Leadership Story,” 18–19.

45. *Ibid.*, 19.

situation of difficulty encountered by the church. He states, “If the promise of the kingdom of God shows us a universal eschatological future horizon spanning all things—that God may be all in all’—then it is impossible for the [person] of hope to adopt an attitude of religious and cultic resignation from the world.”<sup>46</sup>

To be a witness to hope is the essence of the contemporary congregation. Resilience is rooted in the greater reality of God’s coming kingdom. Neil Pembroke states, “The final word in any situation belongs to God and it is always one of hope.”<sup>47</sup>

Hope is the essential frame from which the gospel is enacted in communities of faith. Our language is rooted in our conception of the world<sup>48</sup> and for the congregation the forward momentum of the community of God is the basis for being truly resilient—whatever the situation may be.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets. When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break . . . Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:4–6, 10b, 11)

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