

Resilience

Building staying power in people & partnerships

by Ellen Livingood

Resilience—we all want it. When we take an elevator to the top floor of a skyscraper, we depend on the resilience of steel girders. When the economy goes south, we desperately hope our bank has resilience.

When our teenagers go through tough times, we look for signs that they are becoming resilient adults.

As missions leaders and mobilizers, we realize that the workers we send must have resilience. And our global partnerships, to be successful, require resilience on the part of all involved.



The need to build resilience is not new. From Genesis onward, the biblical narrative reveals God teaching His children lessons in endurance. On the other hand, much in our contemporary Western culture devalues or at least sidelines resilience. We focus on implementing change but give too little time to considering how to maintain the continuity so vital to our purpose.

It's important to note the crucial difference between **resilience** and **resistance**. Resistance holds steady, refusing to give an inch, but resilience makes an object flexible. Resilient entities bend and adjust to pressure—without breaking. We live in a world where that kind of flexibility, that resilience, is absolutely essential. For instance, we need to flex to use the new social

media while maintaining an unbreakable focus on the message that our task is to reach the nations.

In green boxes scattered throughout this article are scenarios of resilience problems common in missions.

At our **Interchange Conferences** this fall (Denver—Nov. 1 and Philadelphia—Nov. 28, see info at end) we will wrestle with how to respond to these challenges. Plan to join us!

To get us started, in this article I've identified five areas of resilience building and some practical suggestions to stimulate our thinking.

Scenario 1 — Resilient Workers

Riverview Church and All Peoples Agency partnered to send the Ashtons to the field four years ago. Their team's goal was to use a business platform to help launch a church-planting movement in a previously unengaged people. They worked hard at learning a difficult language and living under stressful conditions. In the last year, their business venture finally seemed to gain traction, and the Ashtons' relationships with employees and neighbors significantly deepened. Then suddenly, the Ashtons announced that they do not plan to return to the field after home assignment.

Resilience-Building Prayer

Persistence in the face of multi-pronged opposition is, first of all, a matter of spiritual warfare (Rm. 15:5, 30-32; Eph. 6:12-18). So it is biblical to directly link ministry resilience to the amount of powerful intercession engaged. Naming prayer as the number one solution is not just a Sunday school answer. If we are serious about increasing our resilience, we must be serious about expanding the intercessory base in our churches.

How are you preparing people for spiritual warfare—both on the field and from back here at home? Where is this in your list of actionable priorities? Most churches admit that their dedicated intercessors are over age 60. It appears that the American church has several generations



Scenario 2 — Resilient Partnerships

After a strong start and four years of sometimes sporadic involvement, Trinity Church's partnership to reach the Sagetree people has lost momentum. Their only regular communication from the field came from an on-site worker who changed ministries, so updates are now infrequent. Then six months ago, Trinity's Sagetree Focus champion moved away. Now their GO team believes they should chalk this adoption up to experience and start all over with a new emphasis closer to home.

of adults and children who have never learned how to engage in powerful, persistent prayer. Whatever your role in missions—church leader or agency staff—do you need to reexamine where nurturing the next generations of pray-ers falls on your order of personal and job priorities? Where should you start?

Scenario 3 — Resilient Relationships

When two-term missionaries, the Randolphins, returned to their sending church, they felt like strangers. Few people at Calvary remembered them. The missions pastor who helped them get to the field has moved on, and the new outreach pastor has little experience in global missions. The Randolphins feel like they are “starting over” and sense little or no true partnership with Calvary.

Resilient Workers

How do we nurture in workers Habakkuk-style faith and steadfastness (Hab. 3:17-19) that will result in resilience? What questions should a sending church regularly ask their missionaries? How can they sensitively surface issues that should be addressed before resilience is eaten away and there's another missionary casualty? As church leaders, can we name the

most difficult challenge each of our workers is facing right now? Do we know one or two things that each missionary would say is most renewing for him/her?

From the outset, churches and their workers need to expect, and be transparent about, ministry pressures: loneliness, interpersonal conflicts, physical danger, lack of ministry results, financial problems, family pressure, etc. Addressing these realities cannot be the responsibility of just the missionary and the agency. As spiritual family, the sending church must take a proactive approach, helping to carry the load through every stage of ministry. Face-to-face interaction is essential to really understand what is going on under the surface. Regular field visits by pastors and other gifted encouragers are key.

Since missions leaders in both church and agency are predominantly male, the problems of missionary wives and children too often go unnoticed until the damage is irreparable. Women missionaries need visits from a

pastor **and** the pastor's wife or other women sensitive to their issues. One resilience-building resource especially for women is Janice Lemke's ***Five Loaves and Two Bowls of Borscht*** with its study guide, ***Finding Strength for the Journey***. (As one small step, why not make these a Christmas gift to each of your women missionaries?)

Scenario 4 — Resilient Vision

Almost three years ago, Grace Church enthusiastically adopted the vision of their national church partner to establish five leadership training hubs. Each of the first two years, Grace gave a substantial gift toward launching these hubs, but progress on the field side was slow. More recently, Grace's senior pastor was introduced by his close friend to the urgent need to rescue trafficked women and children. The pastor has now presented this ministry from the pulpit and is urging the missions team to shift major funding to this new effort.

Resilient Church Vision

We need the whole church to embrace our partnerships so that ownership of the vision permeates the church from the top down. Instead, partnerships are too often owned only by a small core group from the missions team. Even worse, at times I have watched missions pastors develop initiatives that were really just a partnership between themselves and the field entity—backed up with church funding. Little wonder that such partnerships crack when other strong leaders in the church adopt a different vision!

On the other hand, churches with resilient partnerships consider their global focus an integral part of their DNA. One indicator? When hiring a new pastor, they make it clear to candidates that joining the church staff means buying into the congregation's global vision.

Partnerships thrive where church leaders understand

the reality that fulfilling their global vision is not only an exciting God-given calling but also a downright hard task! Expecting bumps on the road, they still view their commitment to their global partners to be equally as important as their commitment to the bank around the corner which holds the church mortgage.

Resilient Leadership Approaches

Transience is a fact of life for most Western churches, so transitions in leadership must be expected. Truly resilient missions efforts are developed around intentionally flexible leadership approaches. It's not "Will you fill this role?" but rather "How can we best engage your gifts and time to accomplish what our Body believes God wants us to do?" Then we must expect that the answers to that question will constantly change as new people catch the vision and step into leadership. The tricky thing is that at the same time, we need organizational strategies that are strong and deep enough to provide continuity.

In the past, churches were told to recruit one person to serve as "champion" for their adoption or partnership. Unfortunately, this approach too often undermines resilience. In this model, when the champion moves on for whatever reason, the whole effort often



collapses because everything depended on him/her. A single "champion" is also vulnerable to discouragement and burnout. Another reason for adopting a different model is the fact that younger generations prefer to work on a team rather than lead alone.

Learning from Jesus' example of sending out His disciples in teams of two, churches are shifting toward recruiting co-leaders. "We won't start any new effort until we have a team," is their new policy. Whether you are a missions pastor or a lay church leader, it is

crucial to resist the urge to do it alone when there are no other leaders evident or because you think you can move faster if you just lead it yourself. In a volunteer-based system, anyone who will do it alone, is almost always left to do it alone—forever!

Resilient Partner Relationships

At the end of the day, partnership resilience often comes down to the timely employment of problem-solving skills. However, we missions folks are “nice people” and tend to avoid confrontation whenever possible. But resilient people who lead resilient efforts are problem solvers—they have both the commitment and the skills to confront issues and to walk others through the process of resolving conflict.

Most of us could use some improvement of our problem-solving ability, so consider stretching/refreshing

your skills through a workshop, or better yet, a coaching relationship. And don’t assume someone else has trained your missionaries or your missions team in this all-important area. Look for to-date undiscovered resources—people in your church whose jobs involve training/coaching workplace teams or leaders in problem resolution. Put their skills to Kingdom use! Another resource is the practical problem-solving training offered by [Peacemaker University](#), and [Interpersonal Skills Workshop](#).

Let’s Dig Deeper

Join us at Interchange this year to continue this discussion. Meanwhile, here are some questions to help strengthen your resilience-building skills.

If you are a church missions leader

- What are your goals for increasing the amount of missions intercession in your church? Who are you mentoring in global praying?
- What concrete steps are you taking to develop resilience in future workers? How are you building your congregation’s vision for, and ability to provide, stable, long-term support?
- Do you have a list of questions you regularly ask your field workers to help you evaluate their current “resilience quotient”? If you have concerns, have you contacted the personnel department of their agency to see how you could work together to strengthen their resilience?
- If your overall church leadership does not have strong ownership of your missions priorities and partnerships, what are some practical steps you could take to expand their vision?
- How could you identify the factors that have the potential to destabilize your existing partnerships? Which issues could you address now, before there is a crisis?

If you wear an agency hat

- If a church leader shared any of the scenarios described in this article, do you have specific suggestions to address the resilience problem?
- What do you recommend to churches looking for concrete ways to develop future missionaries' ability to stay the course?
- How can you help churches and their missionaries assess workers' resilience during on-field visits or home assignment? Can you help churches spot danger signs?
- What do you believe are the three top essentials churches should build into their partnerships to give them resilience? Do you have stories of churches that successfully integrated these partnership components?
- What specific steps could you take if you sense a church is losing interest in their partnership with your workers/agency?
- How could you personally and corporately help churches maintain vision and involvement across leadership changes?
- How are you improving your personal skills in problem solving and conflict resolution?

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