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# Exploring Habits of Well-Being Rooted in Resiliency Among Ministry Leaders Having Experienced a Leadership Transition of Senior Pastor in the Church: A Case Study

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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

**Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

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by

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to those who answer a call to serve Christ's church either voluntarily or in vocational Christian ministry. May you remember ministry is your calling, not your identity. As you engage in daily ministry, be mindful that your well-being and resilience is critical in fulfilling Christ's mission. May God bless you on your journey to reclaiming Christ's leadership in and through you.

**Acknowledgments**

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Finally, to the men and women in the case study church who shared their hearts and bore their souls for this project. This is your story reflective of God's grace and faithfulness to you. I love you all and thank you for trusting me with your story. Romans 5:1–5 is reflected in your journey, and we are all better for it. Soli Deo gloria!

## Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological single case study sought to understand potential influence of well-being and resilience of ministry leaders where an unplanned leadership transition had occurred. With an interest in personal well-being of ministry leaders, the researcher was curious how those who remained on church staff endured a 2-year period between the departure of one senior pastor and the hiring of a new senior pastor. Much of the existing research on church leadership transitions focused on the negative factors associated with failures. Generally, there is a lack of understanding of the positive influences of well-being and resiliency. The researcher sought to understand the potential influence of well-being and resilience on ministry leaders after an unplanned leadership transition had occurred. Actionable research with qualitative interview techniques provided for both inductive and deductive gathering of data. It was inductive in that it collected verbatim responses in an open-ended format, and it was deductive because it presented existing parameters for responses within the characteristics of well-being and traits of resiliency. As a qualitative study, interview questions focused on capturing the narratives that told a story, an individual story overlaid with other individual stories. Each respondent had an individualized, unique lived experience of the time under study. Purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, was chosen to better match the sample to the aims and objectives of the research. The sample was limited to those individuals on staff during the transition who were in positions of influence and represented each of the three areas of leadership in the church: elders, pastors, and support staff. This representation produced a total participant pool of 25 respondents. Structured interviews allowed for the same questions to be asked but with an array of responses gleaned. Interviews allowed for enabling techniques using word prompts directly linked to the study's two research questions. Content coding of individual interviews utilized in vivo coding and values

coding. Ten themes emerged from the data: one theme of leadership issues with four subthemes noted, five themes specific to well-being, and four relevant to resilience. Among all 25 respondents, overall well-being was 69% and resiliency was 79%.

*Keywords:* well-being, resiliency, pastors, church, ministry, leadership

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Christian ministry leaders serving in pastoral roles are responsible for providing leadership to the practical operation of the church as an organization and the mental, emotional, and spiritual guidance to individuals under their ecclesiastical authority. Studies of clergy well-being have focused on predicting factors associated with depression, burnout, conflict, and occupational distress (Adams et al., 2017; Anglim et al., 2020; Francis et al., 2017; Pomerleau et al., 2020; Terry & Cunningham, 2020). Although research is growing in this area, few researchers have studied ministry leader well-being from factors that support habits of well-being from positive leadership (Hough et al., 2019; Rosales et al., 2020). Further understanding of the habits of well-being is needed as ministry leaders experience unplanned transitions of pastoral leadership in the church. This study investigates ministry leaders' habits of well-being in their lived experience of an unplanned transition.

Existing research documents the increased instability among clergy to cope with their ministry functions emotionally (Case et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2020; Hough et al., 2019; Milstein et al., 2020). In a comparison study with other high-stress caregiving professions, clergy reported moderate levels of burnout, suggesting clergy cope well with burnout, a notion that researchers want to further understand (Adams et al., 2017). Even so, clergy burnout, depression, and occupational stress contribute to ministry leaders reporting factors of low spiritual well-being (Adams et al., 2017; Case et al., 2020; Cook, 2020; Salwen et al., 2017). In contrast to studies focused on problematic issues as mediators, the study of well-being is a tenet of the most recent branch of the social science: positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As such, this study investigated the lived experiences of ministry leaders as they provided

qualitative data for analysis toward understanding how habits of well-being factor into continued ministry leadership through an unplanned leadership transition in the church.

**Statement of the Problem**

There is a lack of understanding of how well-being may or may not influence resiliency among ministry leaders who remain on church staff after an unplanned pastoral leadership transition. Generally, the identified problem of an unplanned change in pastoral leadership can disturb the well-being of other ministry leaders (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013; Pomerleau et al., 2020). This problem affected the ministry leadership of one church researched for this case study. This large church has a ministry leadership staff of 52 who experienced an abrupt, unforeseen, unplanned pastoral leadership transition when their senior pastor went on sabbatical and resigned upon returning without a succession plan. This specific problem applies to those ministry leaders remaining on church staff dealing with their disappointments, frustrations, and setbacks stemming from the events of a leadership transition.

An understanding of positive leadership roles specific to resiliency as a habit of well-being may be reflected in how ministry leaders remain in their spiritual leadership through a difficult season of transition (Cuthbert et al., 2018; Washington, 2016). This case study sought the individual narratives of a specific group of people with a shared experience of remaining on church staff between one senior pastor leaving the church and another senior pastor being hired. The timeframe for the events of this case study was April 20, 2019, to March 22, 2021.

**Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative phenomenological single case study aimed to understand the potential influence of well-being on ministry leaders' resilience after an unplanned leadership transition occurred. As a qualitative study, the research focused on the lived experiences of the

respondents. The phenomenological event for this case study is one of disruption connected to the abrupt leaving of a senior pastor as the church leader. This research explicitly looked at habits of well-being outlined in the PERMA model representing positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement as presented in Seligman's theory of well-being under the umbrella of positive psychology. The theory attributed to Martin Seligman is noted in the collaborative research of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000).

The nature of this study addressed a single case. The population for this research encompassed one church at which the respondents were current staff members in roles of support staff, ministry directors, associate pastors, or elders that were also on staff during a prolonged leadership transition between two senior pastors. The research did not include staff members that subsequently left the church for any reason amid or since the transition. Nor did this study include all 52 current church staff members. Criteria for the pool of prospects produced 41 qualified respondents. However, I further culled the sample to those whose job descriptions required additional work specific to the ministry during an "all-hands-on-deck" initiative that increased demand, expectations, and responsibilities during the transition. This sampling technique limited responses to eight elders, 10 pastors, eight ministry directors, and three support staff members. This representation allowed a total participant pool of 29 possible respondents bound by their individual decisions to remain in their ministry roles during the transition. I explored the problem using structured interviews in which the questions were predetermined in both topic and order. I then collected, transcribed, and coded the qualitative data for analysis.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study built on Seligman's theory of well-being (WBT) and considered the ongoing stressors experienced in organizational leadership (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Healthy

well-being is the human experience of positive emotions and psychological and social functioning operating within an optimal range for human efficacy (Frederick & White, 2015; Potts, 2020; Redelinghuys et al., 2019). The PERMA model identifies five essential elements of well-being: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and achievement (A). These five tenets of the theory of well-being work as a grounding theoretical concept that helps explain the science of what it means to function optimally, and these tenets provided the parameters of the framework driving the current study. As such, WBT provided clarity and common language that helped me evaluate resiliency among ministry leaders interpreting their individual lived experiences having served during an unplanned pastoral leadership transition in the church.

## Research Questions

**RQ1:** How does an unplanned leadership transition affect habits of well-being (e.g., positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement)?

**RQ2:** How are habits of well-being related to characteristics of resiliency (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism)?

## Definition of Key Terms

There are several vital terms needing definition for understanding and interpreting this research.

**Achievement.** As part of the PERMA model, achievements are the results accomplished when individuals work toward their goals and achieve mastery, competence, or success (Seligman, 2018). Achievement and accomplishment are at times used synonymously in the literature.

**“All-hands-on-deck.”** During a leadership transition, this phrase was verbalized by executive-level church leadership to the ministry staff of the case study church. As an internal communication, it reflects a crisis communication metaphor, potentially influencing actual and perceived well-being (Bruskin & Mikkelsen, 2020; Hekkala et al., 2018).

**Elder.** An elder in the church describes a volunteer office closely related to the role of deacon, defined as an overseer or under-shepherd in a specific congregation (Merkle, 2021; Stewart, 2019). The case study church tasks their elders to guide, guard and govern the church (Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:2).

**Engagement.** As part of the PERMA model, engagement is the state an individual experiences when living in the present moment, focused entirely on a task. Engagement is described as losing oneself in an activity one loves or losing track of time engaged in a task (Seligman, 2018).

**Forgiveness.** As an identified requisite of resiliency, forgiveness is an intentional act of pardon or release from an injury, offense, or debt culminating in releasing someone from words or actions that would impede the relationship of those involved (Campbell & Bauer, 2021; Rye, 2022; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13).

**Gratitude.** As an identified requisite of resiliency, gratitude has significant effects on improving the mental health of individuals, increasing their well-being, and strengthening social support perceptions and self-esteem. Research suggests gratitude positively changes resilience, increasing optimism and being a protective factor against stress and depression (Campbell & Bauer, 2021; Kardas et al., 2019).

**Habits of well-being**. Habits of well-being are choices reflective of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment for healthy leadership that benefit the individual and organization (Cameron, 2013).

**Hope.** As an identified requisite of resiliency, hope holds out the possibility of outcomes in present circumstances when emotions are mixed (Bruininks & Howington, 2019; Campbell & Bauer, 2021).

**Meaning.** As part of the PERMA model, meaning is life purpose, where individuals devote their lives to something greater than themselves (Seligman, 2018).

**Ministry leader.** Ministry leaders may work as pastors, associate ministers, directors, administrators, or support staff in a Christian church. Some individuals identified as ministry leaders may be paid by the church or in volunteer positions (Case et al., 2020; Potts, 2020; 1 Corinthians 12:1–12).

**Optimism.** As an identified requisite of resiliency, optimism is positive expectations about the future concerning emotion, perseverance, problem-solving, and healthy achievement (Campbell & Bauer, 2021; Kardas et al., 2019).

**Pastor**. Pastors are Christian ministers who hold the role of clergy and have ecclesiastical authority in Christian churches. All clergy are ministry leaders, but not all ministry leaders are clergy (Bird, 2014; Cafferata, 2017; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians 9:14; Acts 20:28).

**Positive emotions.** As part of the PERMA model, positive emotions are a prime indicator of a flourishing individual and can be cultivated or learned. Examples include joy, love, compassion, fulfillment, hope, interest, amusement, and gratitude (Seligman, 2018).

**Relationships.** As part of the PERMA model, relationships influence well-being by strengthening or maintaining intimacy. This relationship may involve simple actions like sharing good news or responding enthusiastically to the presence of others (Seligman, 2018).

**Resilience.** Resilience is one specific habit of well-being that contributes to individuals' ability to recover quickly from difficulties, challenges, and crises (Jankowski et al., 2019; Kompelien, 2018). Characteristics of resiliency pertinent to this study reflect concepts of forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism, as introduced by Campbell and Bauer (2021).

**Unplanned leadership transition.** Unplanned transitions in leadership can be due to internal or external factors at any given time. A transition can include the involuntary removal or voluntary departure of leadership, creating the potential for occupational distress in the organization (Milstein et al., 2020).

## Summary

Emerging research on well-being suggests that when leaders flourish, their constituents and organizations do too (Carleton et al., 2018; Jankowski et al., 2020; Little, 2020; Oliveira-Silva & Porto, 2021; Solovey & Weinstein, 2019). Research related to clergy leadership is more heavily weighted on problematic symptoms determined by assessing, defining, and eradicating problem issues rather than affirming and connecting positive leadership habits of well-being (Pomerleau et al., 2020; Milstein et al., 2020). A prospective study of the habits of well-being related to resilience among ministry leaders may address deficiencies in the literature suggested by current researchers (Hough et al., 2019; Milstein et al., 2020; Rosales et al., 2020; Terry & Cunningham, 2020). Therefore, this study sought to address the problem of how a change in pastoral leadership may or may not have disrupted the well-being of other ministry leaders that remained in their church ministry role after an unplanned transition.

My emphasis in this study was not on the event that caused the disruption. Instead, the focus was on understanding the lived experiences as they may or may not have reflected the well-being and resiliency of those who remained in their position throughout the change in senior pastor leadership. I make no inference or assumption regarding the well-being of those staff members who did not remain on staff during the transition. Nor did I assume that all who did stay exhibited habits of well-being or resiliency. Although worth considering, this study did not focus on unplanned events of the transition. Instead, I focused on the potential well-being of those who remained through the events of this specific case, seeking to explore the mechanisms and mindsets that may have contributed to resiliency through an unplanned departure and the ultimate hiring of another senior pastor. I acknowledge that well-being and resiliency were not the only reasons respondents chose to stay in their position during the transition. However, I sought to understand if and how well-being and resiliency did or did not play a role.

Key terms provide descriptive guidance for the research. Studying the lived experiences of ministry leaders should provide insight into the role of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement/accomplishments, as the theory of well-being provides a framework (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The research questions for this study flow from this theory and explore the well-being trait of resiliency (Seligman, 2011), characterized by forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism (Campbell & Bauer, 2021).

Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the theory undergirding this study—resiliency as related to habits of well-being and unplanned pastoral leadership transitions. The literature review is organized as follows: First, it provides current themes and research on concepts contributing to understanding unplanned pastoral leadership transitions. It clarifies the theoretical framework of the theory of well-being (WBT). Third, it establishes literature on well-being

habits specific to resiliency characteristics defined as forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism. A brief context of the case under study is provided with literature supporting the dynamics connected to the aim of this study. Synthesis of these concepts within the literature review is foundational to addressing the stated problem noted in the current study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The church as an organization significantly influences the lives of people in the congregation and those in ministry leadership. Leadership transitions in the church can be disruptive for the congregation and the remaining church staff members (Epstein et al., 2020; Milstein et al., 2020). In reviewing the current literature, the following questions motivated this study:

(a) How do Christian ministry leaders on a church staff cope with the sudden loss of their respected senior pastor in the church? This question speaks to the mechanisms employed to endure a potentially tricky transition.

(b) How are habits of well-being related to resiliency practiced by ministry leaders remaining on staff when an unplanned leadership transition occurs? This question speaks to the curiosity of mindsets needed to endure a transition.

(c) How is well-being as a theory applicable to ministry leaders managing after an unplanned transition in the church? This question captures the overarching management process of mechanisms and mindsets needed to endure a difficult transition.

The challenge was understanding how the departure of the senior pastor of the church influenced the well-being of other ministry leaders that remained on staff during and after the transition. This literature review aimed to explore the problem by introducing a theoretical framework to investigate habits of well-being among ministry leaders serving churches at which unplanned leadership transitions have occurred as these leaders remain engaged in the dynamic with seemingly resilient qualities.

The literature search began with the online utilization of the Brown Library on the campus of Abilene Christian University. Access utilized remotely searchable databases,

academic journals, and available archives. EBSCO was the primary search engine while procuring numerous articles from religious, educational, and scientific journals. Searches in the database sought peer-reviewed articles written in 2017 or after. Keywords used to produce the literature search were the following: *clergy retention*, *clergy health*, *well-being*, *disruptive leadership transition*, *church conflict*, *ministry leadership and longevity*, *flourishing*, *thriving*, *resiliency in ministry*, *employee retention factors*, and *succession plan for leadership transition*. Several other keywords yielded articles on the topic of focus, including a search of the theoretical framework for this study: *theory of well-being*.

Findings from these keyword searches produced a wealth of information to provide context for narrowing the scope of the current study. For example, the concept of clergy working in a consumer mentality context contributes to a failing system, as noted by Ketcham (2012). Specifically regarding frustrations of youth pastors, Ketcham (2012) notes, "Although unintended, adult passer/youth receiver roles may lead to a misunderstanding of the Christian faith and the church as a product for personal consumption" (p. 12). Noting the demands of ministry leadership, researchers find correlations between emotional intelligence (Francis et al., 2019; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017) and humility and narcissism (Jankowski et al., 2019). Clergy retention hinges on communication or lack thereof (Joynt, 2019).

Research on clergy and pastoral ministry leadership highlights destructive leadership connected to leader-centric patterns (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). As noted, much of the literature focuses on problems, such as burnout and compassion fatigue (Adams et al., 2017), issues of conflict (Fuller, 2014), hypocrisy (Effron et al., 2018), strategic failures (Allard-Poesi, 2015; Grandy, 2013), and power struggles noted in ministry politics (Dirik & Eryılmaz, 2018).

Closer to the aim of this study, literature provided insight into personal well-being related to character traits (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2021). Taking character into consideration for ministry leadership addresses the research on subjective well-being (Oliver & MacLeod, 2018; Oliveira-Silva & Porto, 2021; Oliver et al., 2018). Flourishing goes beyond the mental and emotional realm to also explore the physical well-being of individuals (Klussman et al., 2021; Little, 2020). In addition to the literature on the individual minister, the church as a congregation has research focused on followership as a concept in congregational life, including the institutional components of well-being (McCormack, 2012; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019; Nilsson, 2015).

This literature review was limited in addressing well-being in church leadership. Although much of the existing literature pertains to research related to clergy leadership focused on problematic symptoms determined by assessing, defining, and eradicating problematic issues such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and organizational dissent (Garner, 2016), this review is limited to the affirmation and connection of positive leadership habits of well-being, specific to resilience during a time of an unplanned leadership transition.

This review explores the concept of well-being as a potentially influential factor in the individual lived experiences of ministry leaders facing unplanned pastoral leadership transitions in the church. The scope of this review does not address burnout, compassion fatigue, or other notable problems innate in change management, organizational culture, or diffusion of innovations. However, future research should include these concepts linked to possible causations, and mitigating well-being factors applied explicitly to church leadership. Therefore, the direction of this literature review fell into three categories: leadership transition, theoretical

framework, and habits of well-being specific to resiliency. These sections provide an understanding of the problem in the case study context of this study.

## Theoretical Framework Discussion

I built this study on Seligman's WBT, considering the ongoing stressors experienced in organizational leadership (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman's theory provided specific categories and processes of the study's theoretical framework. The WBT drives the research questions, data collection, and analysis. The context for WBT as a framework stems from the World Health Organization's (WHO's) definition of positive mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to the community" (Sayers, 2001, p. 2).

### *Theory of Well-Being*

Essential to this study as a theoretical framework is Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's theory of well-being (WBT; 2000). The theory identifies five essential elements represented in the mnemonic PERMA: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and achievement(A). WBT originated in the social sciences and is a central concept in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). WBT has helped scholars and researchers organize a framework of positive rather than debilitating factors as a conceptual lens.

Seligman authored the book *Flourish* (2012), which when reviewed in the *Journal of Positive Psychology,* was noted as his attempt to clarify and distinguish his theory as more conducive to well-being rather than the solo concept of happiness (Conway, 2012). This refocus has produced more literature with a broader approach to study within the positive psychology community. Notably, studies focused on children living in poverty (Ho et al., 2022) and research

on the discipline of children (Upadhyay et al., 2022) provide examples of how WBT has been applied. Studies using WBT have focused on various sectors of society; the healthy (Diener et al., 2017), the depressed (Panaite et al., 2022), and employees (Wang, 2022). The tenets of WBT explain a set of core ideas to approach human problems positively (Seligman, 2012).

WBT has been utilized in research studies spanning several interests, with findings such as the following: "Individuals who report high levels of well-being often exhibit greater productivity at work, more effective learning behaviors, higher creativity, a greater range of prosocial behaviors, better physical health, and more positive relationships" (Liao & Chen, 2022, p. 2). In addition to studying individual well-being, researchers have connected the tenets of well-being to organizations by encouraging a shift in looking into how the theory can be applied in the workplace (Wilcox & Koontz, n.d.).

For this review, WBT informed how the literature focuses on identifying positive factors of influence among ministry leaders' lived experiences in an unplanned leadership transition. A study conducted by Milstein et al. (2020) showed that clergy receive "possible protective attributes of spiritual well-being against depressive symptoms" (p. 415). Further research shows PERMA examples of how these elements have fostered overall well-being specific to clergy and ministry leadership (Edwards et al., 2020; Milstein et al., 2020; Terry & Cunningham, 2020). Positive emotions (P) as a well-being trait connects to the clergy's positive self-regard (Lee & Rosales, 2020). Well-being characterized by engagement (E) shows a differentiator between positive mental health and burnout in the clergy (Case et al., 2020). Well-being reflects relationships (R) as fostering positive psychological adjustments during stress (Pomerleau et al., 2020). Well-being specifically connected to clergy is related to meaning (M), created when lived values fit with a spiritual calling (Rosales et al., 2020). Well-being can be measured by

achievement (A), which, among the clergy, is linked to occupationally specific variables driven by mission, vision, strategy, and goals (Bickerton et al., 2015). Thus, habits of well-being as outlined in Seligman's PERMA model provided the framework for gaining clarity on the problem of this study.

### *Positive Emotions (P)*

Research in pursuit of discovering the connection between positive emotions and positive interventions found increased intensity and a varied spectrum of positive emotions (Gander et al., 2020). These positive emotions influence overall well-being as people can effectively pursue happiness in their daily lives and benefit from prioritizing positivity (Catalino & Tov, 2022). Research on positive emotions connected to well-being has focused on the parent-child relationship (Shoshani & Yaari, 2022), relational connections during the Covid-19 pandemic (Varma et al., 2022), and specific emotional connection to God as studied in the context of racial differences (Krause & Ironson, 2017). The nuanced approaches to studying positive emotions have produced literature on the benefit of joy (Watkins et al., 2018) and are closely related to the current study, focusing on the mediating factor of prayer and psychological well-being among Christians (Zarzycka, 2021).

### *Engagement (E)*

The study of engagement specific to well-being finds a large audience among human resource director publications. As such, an emphasis is placed on implementing policies that help maintain a work-life balance with a desire to achieve high performance and low turnover (Gaikwad et al., 2021; Lizano, 2021). The concept of flow and its importance for negating the effects of stress have also been researched as engagement for well-being (Clauss et al., 2021; Wang, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Engagement among healthcare professionals has also been

studied, noting its positive influence on well-being (Epstein et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022). Studies that link engagement and well-being to clergy note factors of stress, burnout, and positive engagement in a ministry context, which support the current study (Adams et al., 2017; Bickerton et al., 2015; Case et al., 2020; Cook, 2020; Francis et al., 2017).

### *Relationships (R)*

Developing and maintaining healthy relationships is key to well-being as "ongoing relationships, especially well-functioning ones in which people feel secure (e.g., appreciated, cared for, and respected), are associated with psychological and physical health" (Van Lange & Columbus, 2021). The stress of relationships has produced studies seeking to rethink and reframe how relationships are navigated to maximize well-being (Huxhold et al., 2022). Studies on relationships related to well-being have also produced literature on degrees of obligation in a relationship (Oh et al., 2020), clarity around social connectedness (Ermer & Proulx, 2022), and understanding roles of healthy relating (Roper & Tobin, 2022). Most pertinent to the current study are the concepts of pastoral and clergy connectedness, awareness, and practices of relationships (Erasmus et al., 2022; Jankowski et al., 2021; Lee & Rosales, 2020; Rosales et al., 2020).

### *Meaning (M)*

The meaning of life and a sense of purpose nurture individual well-being as meaning contributes to thriving (Li et al., 2021). Research in meaning has found social and emotional loneliness influence well-being related explicitly to the meaning and purpose of life (Özdogan, 2021). Meaning has been closely aligned with optimism (Aglozo et al., 2021) and the defining of meaning-making as a way to enhance well-being (Cavanaugh et al., 2020). Specific to the study of clergy and pastoral ministry leadership, meaning is attached to the characteristics of spiritual

leadership and vocational calling (Bickerton et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018; Strunk et al., 2017). Additional research connects the awe of God to a more profound meaning and purpose (Upenieks & Krause, 2022). This awe of God is an expected connection to a sense of calling involved with resiliency related to the current study.

### *Accomplishment/Achievement (A)*

Productivity and the ability to attain goals are factors in personal well-being. Goal-based interventions can improve well-being when focused on goals aligned with personal values and chosen by the individual (Oliver & MacLeod, 2018). A longitudinal study of adults found goal flexibility significantly impacted participant well-being (Hajek & König, 2021).

Accomplishment, as it reflects well-being, has been studied in terms of personality, happiness, and psychological health (Francis & Crea, 2018). These observations have been made specifically to clergy and ministry leaders emphasizing spiritual health (Hough et al., 2019) and ministry leadership training focused on creating a healthy culture within the church (Smith, 2020).

## Linking Theory to Christian Practice

Linking PERMA and the WBT to applied Christianity has its proponents as Christian theology has much to learn from positive psychology, and positive psychology has much to gain from Christian theology (Charry & Kosits, 2017). However, others suggest a more cautious approach to positive psychology and its connection to early Christian teachings, as the differences are more notable than the similarities (Nelson & Slife, 2017). With such differences in the perceived value of positive psychology and Christianity, researchers in this area look specifically at issues such as personality traits. Francis and Crea (2018) found lower levels of personal well-being among introverted clergy than by extraverted clergy. Studies of well-being

and clergy focus on the benefits of well-being and positive psychology relating to the pastor as a counselor (Adams, 2017), assessing the meaning of abundant life and its connection to hope (Sain, 2020), measuring depression (Edwards et al., 2020), evaluating stress (Terry & Cunningham, 2020), and identifying how healthy coping assists with role demands of the clergy (Edwards et al., 2022).

Research on ministry leadership attributes burnout, depression, and occupational stress to ministry leaders reporting factors of low spiritual well-being (Adams et al., 2017; Case et al., 2020; Cook, 2020; Salwen et al., 2017). Similarly, research also shows healthy habits of well-being sustain ministry leadership, including humility, self-regard, and relational spirituality (Jankowski et al., 2019; Lee & Rosales, 2020; Salwen et al., 2017).

The current study sought to understand how ministry leaders remaining on church staff after an unplanned pastoral leadership transition may or may not have functioned in an optimal state, depending on personal habits of well-being. Research in this area suggests habits of well-being in the internal dialogue of clergy play a mediating role when under spiritual strain (Zarzycka & Puchalska-Wasyl, 2020).

### *Habits of Well-Being Reflected in Resiliency*

For this study, one of the most pertinent concepts to the research is the well-being habit of resiliency. From an organizational perspective, resilience is "a system's ability to continue to perform and meet its objectives in the face of challenges" (Barasa et al., 2018, p. 496). From an individual perspective, researchers Campbell and Bauer (2021) found four notable characteristics of resilience "defined by concepts of forgiveness, hope, gratitude, and learned optimism" (p. 33). These characteristics capture what it means to endure through difficulty and are pertinent to the focus on resiliency for this study's emphasis on habits of well-being.

Building resilience is critical to the health of teams and individuals facing difficult circumstances (Seligman, 2011; Seppala, n.d.). Researchers have documented the ability of leaders to endure hardship and difficulty specific to resiliency as morally appropriate and strategically necessary, as referenced in Ferrazzi (2021) and Freeman (2003). The connection between resilience and unplanned leadership transitions is characterized by compassion and empathy; as Kauffman (2020) notes, "most leaders experience contempt attacks at one time or another, especially during times of crisis, uncertainty, and high stress" (p. 3). This type of environment exists in unplanned pastoral leadership transitions in the church and requires specific well-being habits reflected through resiliency.

Why an emphasis on resilience? What is it, why was it essential to this study, and how was it beneficial? According to Smith et al. (2010), resiliency is a personal trait essential to enduring a stressful situation. As noted earlier, ministry leaders facing an unplanned pastoral leadership transition find themselves in a stress-inducing environment. Resiliency, therefore, is key to personal coping and enduring. Noullet et al. (2018) takes this concept further to correlate resiliency to lower levels of compassion fatigue specific to pastoral crises and interventions. According to Sielaff et al. (2021), research and literature on resiliency "provide insight into what factors most impact clergy well-being; as congregations, supervisors, and denominations learn more about these factors, they can more effectively create environments in which clergy can be resilient" (p. 308). This concept begins with understanding the role of forgiveness as the first of four characteristics noted by Campbell and Bauer (2021).

### *Forgiveness*

According to Davis et al. (2012), the sanctification of forgiveness is defined "as the degree to which a victim considers it to be spiritually important to forgive a specific offense" (p.

32). The current study views forgiveness as a habit of well-being for resiliency, which ministry leaders have access to by their faith to forgive as Christ has forgiven them, overlook offenses, and choose forgiveness over bitterness or revenge. Bufford et al. (2018) described forgiveness as the following: “Giving a gift, forgiving an injury or debt, and pardoning an offense or slight are all considered acts of grace” (p. 512). This gift of grace reflected in the act of choosing to forgive is foundational to the mindset required for resiliency, and according to Clabby (2020), actually creates a “positive relationship to specific physical health situations” (p. 123). Ken Sande (2004) noted unforgiveness as having the potential to “poison your thoughts and mind” (p. 205). Forgiveness is deeply personal and critical to an individual’s resilience, because the potential conflict “is an inside-out progression, not an outside-in aggression. Conflict comes from the internal meaning we attach to external events” (Willis, 2018, p. 2). Willis (2018) explained that forgiveness is required of the Christian as a command to obey rather than a suggestion to consider (pp. 68–69). Ministry leaders, as exemplars, are to lead with forgiveness; research by Macaskill (2005) found that “the clergy score higher on total forgiveness, the forgiveness of self, others, and situations; rate forgiveness as being more important; are more trusting; and are less cynical than the Christian and no religious affiliation [NRA] samples in the general population” (p. 203). If forgiveness is foundational to resiliency, the habit of well-being characterized by gratitude is a trait that adds to resiliency.

### *Gratitude*

Dispositional gratitude “reflects how frequently and intensely individuals experience the emotion of gratitude, and the range of events that elicit gratitude as an emotion” (Portocarrero et al., 2022, p. 7). Research has found gratitude and forgiveness “uniquely predict well-being when controlling for each other” (Hill & Allemand, 2011, p. 405). This connection further solidifies

the role of gratitude in resiliency. Not only is gratitude a beneficial trait for individuals working through difficult circumstances, researchers Arnout and Almoied (2021) have empirically found a way "to detect how gratitude, resilience, and well-being can predict creativity" (p. 470).

Gratitude goes beyond verbal thankfulness over circumstances to the core gratitude to God (Knabb et al., 2021). Gratitude is a significant predictor of happiness and personal well-being, according to Kardas (2019), who empirically found that "the variables of gratitude, optimism, hope, and life satisfaction all together accounted for about 51% of the variance of psychological well-being. Gratitude was determined as the most predictive variable for well-being" (p. 98).

Since psychological well-being is an optimum state, the research on gratitude supports the notion that ministry leaders enduring a difficult pastoral leadership transition can measure their resilience by expressing gratitude to God during emotionally painful circumstances. Witvliet (2019) captured the connections of resilience: "Gratitude is the appreciation of a gift received; happiness is the enjoyment of a present good; and hope is the desire for a valued future" (p. 271). Happiness waivers on emotion, whereas hope clings to the current reality in Christ for what is to come. This hope is necessary for ministry leaders' resiliency.

### *Hope*

The concept of hope as a habit of well-being for resiliency through a problematic event is noted by Gallagher et al. (2020), who found evidence that positive expectancies, or hope, determined a greater degree of post-trauma resiliency. Supported by Sain (2020), "Hope is individual, relational and communal" (p. 118). This finding describes hope as a powerful reminder of the need for a Christian community. Hope, as a trait of resiliency, becomes necessary to move forward from an unplanned transition.

Research finds unique distinctions within the concept of hope, which delineate hope from optimism (Bruininks & Howington, 2019). Although research on hope is a relatively new development, hope is noted as another primary trait and mediator contributing to resilience (Lopes & Cunha, 2008; Rand, 2018). At this early stage of hope as a topic of research, it is suggested that "in order for the insights about hope offered in theology and psychology to be seen clearly and shared, it is necessary to have a more precise vocabulary, which will in turn lead to discussion of intellect, will, emotion, desires, and other aspects of the human person" (Sain, 2020, p. 118). Hope is closely aligned with the concept of optimism, which is the fourth of the four traits contributing to resiliency.

### *Optimism*

Research conducted by Gasper et al. (2020) noted a connection between holding favorable, optimistic attitudes or mindsets for the future with attaining goals. If an individual has lost sight of their goals, they are more likely to have less hope and lose an optimistic hold on the future. According to Kvande et al. (2015), specific to the context of this study, "Optimism and pessimism might be important for understanding the influence of religiousness (and specific domains therein) on positive health outcomes like, for instance, well-being and life satisfaction" (p. 132).

The ministry leader most reflecting optimism will have clear goals to which they have committed to see to fruition. According to research by Peters et al. (2010), "Imagining a positive future can indeed increase expectancies for a positive future" (p. 205). An optimistic perspective on leadership transition is critical as other research has noted that "cynicism about change has been investigated in terms of a pessimistic view about the success of future change" (Alavi & Gill, 2017, p. 162). Therefore, it is essential to understand unplanned pastoral leadership

transitions as a potential catalyst for resiliency to thrive despite the potential problems offering a pessimistic alternative.

**Literature Review**

Regarding leadership transitions, existing literature suggests that "organizational leaders do not always conform to organizational goals," which is linked directly to "the hectic and fragmented workdays of leaders [which] may increase the likelihood that they violate ethical norms" (Joosten et al., 2014, p. 1). These ethical norms are the subject of other researchers seeking to understand their influence on disruptive leadership transitions (O'Keefe et al., 2018). Research results have connected ethical leadership and well-being as sequentially mediated (Ilyas et al., 2022). Along the same line of study, research suggests moral distress is linked to unplanned transitions (Epstein et al., 2020; Fehr et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2019; Moore & Grandy, 2017).

The impact of leadership transitions and organizational change is reflected in research noting that change can be either positive or negative, and individuals in the organization are influenced accordingly. As Feldmann (2014) noted, with positive change, "The efficiency and productivity of the organization are increased, facilitating the achievement of the organization's goals and mission. Individual and group morale are improved, and there is an overall sense of cohesion and well-being" (pp. 672–673). Feldman's research also found that negative change was characterized by a "significant increase in stress, anxiety, and resistance (2014, p. 673). Feldman (2014) continues:

> This, in turn, leads to decreased efficiency and productivity, which interferes with achieving the goals and mission of the organization. Another casualty of negative change is common sense—coping strategies or operational plans are adopted that are illogical,

> poorly conceived, or fail to anticipate unexpected consequences. Morale suffers as a result, and feelings of disillusionment and alienation permeate the group. (p. 673)

The perceived relational closeness to the leader who left influenced how individuals were impacted. Relational closeness determines how internal beliefs about the circumstances are appropriated and the extent of the grief process. Feldman (2014) contended that "the common theme to disruptions of the self, occurring in response to change, is loss. Change may force people into new roles and new ways of doing things" (p. 673). Forced change creates tension between time for adjustment and the need for letting go of familiar ways of functioning. Feldman (2014) goes on to clarify that "people with apparently healthy personality structures encounter significant difficulties in adapting to new situations" (p. 673).

Communication during a leadership transition is critical, especially during what some would consider a crisis call to action. Research suggests, "If [employees] don't know why a new action is necessary, they won't be motivated to help you" (Duarte, 2020, p. 3)—connecting communication to the *why* is essential for good leadership. Research has found that "organizations that explicitly value and make paths for speaking up happen are more effective in dealing with challenges of every kind" (Edmondson, 2020, p. 4). Effective communication can include metaphors that reinforce urgency: "Metaphors play an important role in intentional and deliberate sensemaking" (Hekkala et al., 2018, p. 148). However, some researchers note that using metaphors can be a pitfall that leads to ambiguous and imprecise communication (König et al., 2018). Crisis communication metaphors are used and impact the well-being of those attempting to make sense of the communication in context (Bruskin & Mikkelsen, 2020; Manuti & Giancaspro, 2021; Nardon & Hari, 2021).

Research by Oreg & Sverdlik (2011) on the personal impact of organizational change noted that

> some changes are voluntary, others are imposed, and whereas reactions to any change are influenced by how the individual feels about the notion of change, reactions to imposed (vs. voluntary) change are also influenced by how the individual feels about the imposition . . . these two influences could conflict with each other and yield ambivalence. (p. 338)

Their research makes an important distinction between how individuals facing imposed change may react. In contrast, "for those valuing openness, the preference for novelty predisposes individuals to support change, yet their preference for autonomy predisposes them to resist the imposition" (p. 339). Individual responses to imposed organizational change of a senior pastor in the church could be shaped by varying degrees of ambivalence and impact. Oreg and Sverdlik (2011) surmise in their research that

> an employee's personal orientation toward the notion of change predisposes him or her to look favorably on a given organizational change, yet the employee's orientation toward the agent imposing the change yields an unfavorable response to the change initiative. In such a case, the employee is likely to experience ambivalence. (p. 339)

Specific to clergy transitioning out of spiritual leadership in the context of a local church, research by Tanner (2017) suggested that "as ministry demands increase, attacks pick up, stress increases, interpersonal conflicts occur, compassion fatigue increases, mental and physical health diminishes, the minister is worn out, tired of the fight, and is ultimately ready to resign" (p. 193). Similar findings by Spencer et al. (2012) noted that "ministry expectations have fallen short of actual experiences, and that vision conflict exists" (p. 92). Research by Joynt (2018) found that

"clergy left full-time pastoral ministry because of not being called in the first place, having a dual or seasonal call, and leaving due to a number of factors including . . . conflict" (p. 7). Further research by Joynt (2019) concluded that an additional factor contributing to clergy transition is the concept of not being heard in the context of essential communications. Therefore, a distinction must be made between destructive and disruptive leadership transition.

Research provides insight into toxic environments in which leaders must transition (Pik, 2016). These studies contribute to the literature involving destructive leadership transitions. It is noted by Thoroughgood et al. (2018) that "destructive leadership processes reflect complex mosaics that cannot be understood by focusing primarily on leaders . . . effects of [leader] behaviors depend on contingencies related to followers and the environment" (p. 646). For example, May et al. (2014) defined destructive leadership as a "follower's perception of mistreatment by the leader . . . address[ing] how follower's behavior might trigger or prevent further interpersonal mistreatment by their leaders" (p. 204). As such, rather than a leadership transition contributable to a destructive leader, this case study is more closely characterized as a disruptive leadership transition; literature presents a clearer understanding of an unplanned pastoral leadership transition that fails to address clarity specific to three broad issues: succession planning (Bird, 2014; Cavanaugh, 2017; Pugh, 2016), a denominational structure of support (Chong et al., 2018; May, 2020), and church polity (Brackney, 2019; Olds, 2017). I explored these three concepts as disruption factors rather than destruction and applied them in this case study context.

**Context of the Current Case Study**

The church under study is located in a suburban city with a population of 180,000. The congregation at the time of the leadership transition was over 5,000 in attendance. Since the

transition, the average is closer to 1,300. After 28 years of service as the senior pastor of this nondenominational church, the pastor took a sabbatical and, upon his return, resigned from his position. There were no known issues of immorality or unethical behavior on his part that contributed to his departure. His resignation was effective immediately. He stepped out of the pulpit, turning over the preaching duties to an existing teaching team and left the church within weeks.

### *Succession Planning*

The most common disruption among church staff occurs when no succession plan is in place (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013; Pomerleau et al., 2020). The first consideration for the case study church was the apparent lack of planning for the succession of the senior pastor. More specifically, the issue created immediate confusion around a lack of succession planning. The elders were developing a plan, but the lack of implementation of a plan for a successor placed the church in a difficult position that unfolded over the period in which this study focused. Research supports the notion that a biblical basis exists for leadership transitions (Pugh, 2016). Unfortunately, succession planning is the exception and not the norm for pastoral ministry leadership. Research by Lovelace suggestes that “an effective succession planning process should allow for on-the-job training and observation” (Lovelace, 2014, p. 261). This study evaluated a case where no succession plan was in place and therefore did not have what researchers Davis and Dolson (2018) called “a fitting set of fundamental design principles. If the configuration of a company [church] does not fit its needs, it can easily lead to opportunity losses and threaten the efficiency, effectiveness, and longevity of the organization” (p. 48).

The senior pastor who transitioned from the case study church communicated the Word of God effectively on Sunday mornings and was a sought-after keynote speaker at conferences.

Although he influenced many future communicators and pastors, none were established as candidates for succession. Although conversations at the elder level included succession planning, no plan was in place when the senior pastor resigned. The closest alternative was a teaching team to cover the Sunday morning sermons and a senior leadership team (SLT) of staff managers overseeing the church's daily operations. These two entities provided managerial stability but not overall leadership to the church. While managing staff in the early stages of the transition, it was verbally communicated for staff to be "all-hands-on-deck," a metaphor requesting a higher level of commitment for additional work to be done.

### *Denominational Structure*

There is freedom in the nondenominational structure and the potential for disruption when clarity, definition, or communication is not adequately provided within such structures. Oh and Wang (2020) noted that "spiritual leadership requires concerted efforts from both individuals and organizations" (p. 20). Leadership transitioning impacts all involved; McDuff and Mueller (2000) characterize ministry leaders leaving a job by identifying the angst felt by pastoral leaders as leaving a church or leaving a ministry. When a pastor transitions from a church, those other ministry leaders left behind find themselves in a precarious and potentially disruptive situation, especially if the organization is leader-centric (Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

A pastoral leadership transition is potentially disruptive to those ministry leaders who remain. According to Cavanaugh (2017), "Leadership transitions are inevitable and unplanned. When leaders change, there is always a 'disturbance in the force' that, at the very least, is displayed in terms of style and at worst in terms of chaos" (p. 22). This disturbance acknowledges two dynamics of unplanned leadership transitions that affect the organization and those personally involved. Disruptive leadership transitions in the church have ripple effects on

the social and relational dynamics of the church, as supported by findings that "the leader of a congregation is not simply an administrator or fundraiser. He or she is a spiritual leader and confidant" (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013, p. 675).

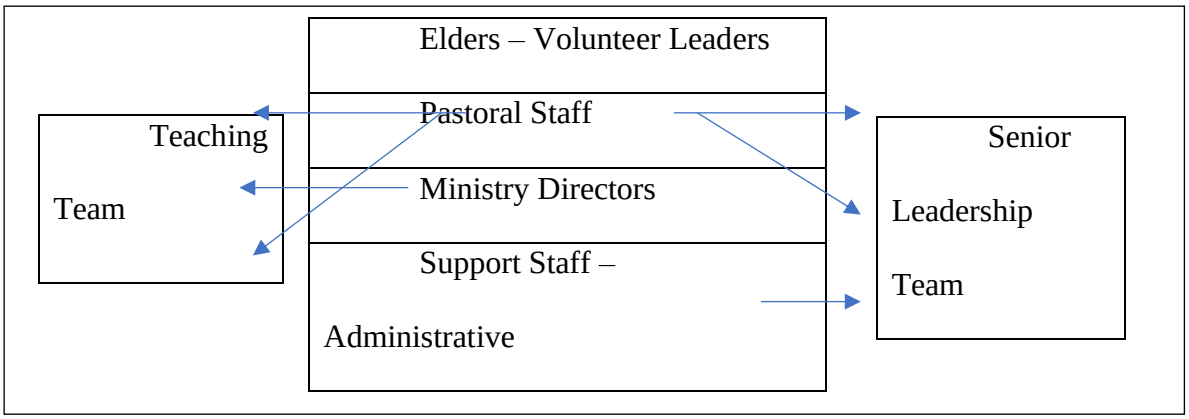
In light of clergy transitions, some denominations rely on liturgical processes and explain "what faithful liturgies do: [they] bring about and enact what they proclaim, name the truth, make room for grief, give voice to hope, and guide us through transition in God's gracious care" (Perdew, 2022, p. 6). A desire to transition gracefully characterized the leadership of the current case study church, although support through formal liturgical emphasis was not provided. The nondenominational church is intentionally established with ultimate autonomy. This autonomy includes a lack of official structure outside the immediate organization that provides oversight, accountability, and standardized processes. These structures are developed and implemented internally within each autonomous church and are not necessarily transferrable to other congregations.

Access to wise counsel among like-minded, denominational support systems was limited. Advice from other churches was sought outside the case study church, but they had no authority to provide accountability for change. This case study church had developed an internal leadership structure with the senior pastor overseeing a senior leadership team (SLT) of vocational staff members and a board of volunteer elders. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the organizational structure and how the case study church's leadership and management functioned before and during the leadership transition. The table reflects the four levels of ministry leadership and which level of leadership provided team members to the teaching and senior leadership teams. There were no elders on either team. Pastoral staff provided some members to both teams. Ministry directors were on the teaching team but not the

senior leadership team, and support staff had representation on the senior leadership team but not the teaching team.

**Figure 1**

*Case Study Church Organizational Structure (2019–2021)*




Elders of the case study church are men and women vetted by sitting elders and the senior pastor, then affirmed by the congregation to serve in a volunteer capacity providing oversight to all matters of the church with an emphasis on guarding, guiding, and governing. The pastoral staff oversees specific ministries of the church and provides ministerial duties as called upon. The teaching team comprises a small number of the pastoral staff and ministry directors on rotation for Sunday preaching assignments. The senior leadership team comprises a small number of pastoral staff and executive support staff managers who supervise the church's daily operations. Ministry directors are those leaders directly providing ministry in each area of ministry focus, some of whom were also on the teaching team. The concept of plurality of leadership during the transition was a challenge in the case study church as some key decisions were made within the elder board to exclude input from other essential leadership in SLT. This oversight is a potential influence on the well-being of ministry leaders pertinent to this study.

### *Church Polity*

Regarding church polity, the case study church aligns with the scriptural concept of governance by a group of elders/overseers who function within the community of believers. In the early church, elders were a united plurality of leadership (Getz & Holman, 2020). A plurality of elders assisted by a ministry of deacons was established as the apostolic model (Horrell, 2004). As with the case study church, there is autonomy and flexibility allowed as the biblical model assigns leaders according to their spiritual gifts of pastoring, preaching, and teaching (Matthew 2:6, 9:46; Mark 6:34; John 21:15-17; Acts 20:28). Curious to this study is the role of polity specifically affecting decision making during the time of transition. Research by Olds (2017) suggests, "Regardless of a church's polity, leadership is distributed among clergy and laypersons, in formal structures and informal networks, between those who are in official positions and those who are not. Leadership for change is a shared endeavor" (p. 43).

Autonomy and plurality of leadership is a debated concept, as noted by one theologian: "The term autonomy does not belong to the trinitarian orientation [of the church]. Not only is it extra-biblical, but it is also thoroughly inadequate theological discourse" (Brackney, 2019, p. 15). In contrast, business and corporate studies on well-being conducted by Cárcaba et al. (2022) state that "accountability, understood as transparency, does not seem to have a significant impact. Surprisingly, we find no immediate effect of corruption on reported [well-being], but a very strong deferred impact" (p. 8). Cárcaba et al.'s research indicates a high degree of autonomy and limited internal accountability can be applied as potential contributors to the dynamics surrounding a ministry leader's lived experiences during a leadership transition.

Research distinguishes between leadership and management in that "leadership sets the vision for the organization, while management carries out the tasks that achieve the vision"

(Feldmann, 2014, p. 677). Article 4 of the case study church bylaws instruct the role of elders but does not clarify the role of the senior leadership team. This leadership and management structure was strained when confusion over responsibility in decision making became an issue for what direction to move forward. This study aimed to research the personal impact of an unplanned leadership transition focused on the post-event well-being of those individual ministry leaders who remained during the transition from one senior pastor to another.

**Summary**

I did not conduct this case study to determine fault, failures, or a deeper understanding of the issues that caused the unplanned leadership transition. Studies of clergy well-being have focused on predicting factors associated with depression, burnout, conflict, and occupational distress (Adams et al., 2017; Anglim et al., 2020; Francis et al., 2017; Pomerleau et al., 2020; Terry & Cunningham, 2020). In contrast, this study sought to understand clergy well-being from factors of the PERMA model that support habits of well-being from positive leadership (Hough et al., 2019; Rosales et al., 2020). Resiliency characteristics provide a more precise understanding and logical framework of how ministry leaders endure an unplanned leadership transition. In this case study I sought to learn how individual ministry leaders endure through a shared experience of difficulty. There is a subjective sense of forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism to the degree of an assumed ability to endure difficult people and events. Chapter 3 offers the design and methodology of this case study, which aimed to understand the lived experience of ministry leaders and how they identify with resiliency as contributing to well-being as they remain on church staff where an unplanned leadership transition has occurred.

# Chapter 3: Research Method

The research design of this study reflects the intent to understand the research aims of this study. This chapter is structured to reveal the research design, methodology, population, sample, data collection, means for analysis, my role, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of this study. Each of these concepts is presented with the expectation of exploring well-being habits rooted in resiliency among ministry leaders who have experienced an unplanned pastoral leadership transition in the church. The methodology and design seek to explore answers to this study's two research questions:

**RQ1**: How does an unplanned leadership transition affect habits of well-being (e.g., positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement)?

**RQ2**: How are habits of well-being related to characteristics of resiliency (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism)?

## Research Design and Method

This research is a qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological, single case study. As a qualitative study, the research focused on the lived experiences of the respondents (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The phenomenological event for this case study was connected to the abrupt leaving of a senior pastor as the church leader. This research explicitly looked at habits of well-being outlined in the PERMA model presented in the Seligman (2000) WBT under the umbrella of positive psychology (Donaldson & Ko, 2010). More specifically, the research focused on the well-being trait of resiliency (Barasa et al., 2018). The nature of this study addressed a single case study with individuals narrating their lived experiences.

In essence, individuals' stories are constructions from layered internal meaning-making that integrates aspects of the social world in which they live. Researchers may identify

> central themes, but the narrative analysis attempts to relate those themes to one another as well as a whole. (Prosek & Gibson, 2021, p. 172)

Therefore, the population for this research encompassed the leadership of one church, and the respondents were elders, pastors, ministry leaders, and support staff who were in their ministry roles during the April 14, 2019, to March 22, 2021 unplanned leadership transition. As such, I designed this study to understand how ministry leaders interpret their individual experiences having served in these roles during a pastoral leadership transition. Interviews with each participant were structured and conducted for 90 minutes face-to-face. These open-ended interviews were facilitated with guided questions and the use of an interview protocol matrix for consistency (Appendix B). This approach allowed descriptions and examples in the participant's language while maintaining the study's conceptual framework and theory integrity.

**Population and Sample**

Pastors, ministry directors, and support staff of the case study church were "all-hands-on-deck" for whatever needs arose within and outside their respective ministry focus. The nature of this research addressed the curiosity of understanding how a departure in senior pastor leadership impacted the well-being of other ministry leaders who remained on the church staff through the transition. This study aimed to answer research questions that explain lived experiences through an unplanned event. The population for this study encompassed the leadership of one church, and the respondents were selected among elders, pastors, ministry directors, and support staff members that were also in their ministry roles during the unplanned leadership transition event between April 14, 2019, and March 22, 2021.

This study used a type of sampling called purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling. According to Campbell et al. (2020), "The reason for purposive sampling is the better

matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigor of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results" (p. 652). Responses were limited to those individuals tasked with increased demands, expectations, and responsibilities during the transition: Eight elders, 10 pastors, eight ministry directors, and three support staff members. This representation allowed a total potential participant pool of 29 possible respondents. This sample provided a saturation point for the scope of this research.

The 29 possible respondents were sent an email from a private, secure email not connected to the church's server (Appendix D). The email came from me and mentioned the support of the current senior pastor and the elder board chairman in asking those receiving the email for their volunteer participation in the research if they were available and willing to do so In that email, potential participants were given clear directions noting the interviews were voluntary, and the senior pastor and chairman would not be told who participated and who did not.

**Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

A critical qualitative analysis of the structured interviews, as defined by Prosek and Gibson (2021), explored the habits of well-being related to resiliency that factor into ministry leaders staying in ministry roles while experiencing disruption to the church during a leadership transition. The interview began with two essential questions to gather background information, followed by a self-reporting question on working relationships and one transition question to glean the attached meaning of the event. Two interview questions were presented to learn the personal lived experience from significant points: the respondents' initial reaction and personal responses through the following weeks. One optional follow-up question was included that was triggered based on responses to the previous two interview questions. The interview had nine

one-word prompts, with five directly linked to RQ1 and four to RQ2. These prompts linked narratives specific to the theory of well-being and resiliency pertinent to the aim of this study. The interview concluded with two final questions allowing respondents to add additional commentary to their narrative and a self-reported relational closeness scaling question.

Interview questions one and two were introductory types of questions for the collection of information specific to the individual respondent that identified correlations between time in a ministry role and characteristics of well-being and resiliency:

Interview question 1: “How long have you been in vocational ministry?”

Interview question 2: “How long have you been ministering here at (case study church)?”

I included a self-reporting question to establish a baseline for workplace interaction between respondents and the transitioning pastor. This data point established possible correlations between work and relational closeness.

Interview question 2b: How would you define your working relationship to Pastor A in terms of interaction? — *daily*, *regularly*, *sporadically*, or *rarely*.

As a transition type of question, interview question number three sought to learn the internalized meaning each respondent gives to the events under study:

Interview question 3: “What word or words would you use to describe the events between (Sr Pastor A) leaving and (Sr Pastor B) arriving?”

The interviews were recorded and transcribed to apply a narrative approach using “storytelling as a communicative activity” that captured meanings attached to individual experiences. (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 202). Interview questions 4a, 4b, and 4c sought to capture the respondents’ lived experiences collectively:

Interview question 4a: “Thinking back to that season, how was the news of Pastor A leaving delivered, and how would you describe your initial reaction to hearing the news?”

Interview question 4b: “In the months that followed, what thoughts and feelings were you experiencing?”

Interview question 4c was a follow-up question that I asked if respondents did not note the call for staff to be “all-hands-on-deck”: “How did you hear and what did you experience when the staff was called to be “all-hands-on-deck”? Interview question 4c was based on the concept of crisis-communication metaphors and their potential influence on well-being and resiliency related to the current study.

This interview method included what Roller and Lavrakas (2015) called “enabling techniques,” such as sentence completion and word association (p. 140). This method was accomplished using word prompts directly linked to RQ1 and RQ2 during the interview process. Specifically, interview question number five included five 3x5 notecards with one word and a brief definition of the following words: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement. These five prompts link to RQ1 and the concept of well-being. A similar enabling technique was used for interview question number six, which used four 3x5 notecards with one word and a brief definition written on each. The four words were Forgiveness, Gratitude, Hope, and Optimism. These four prompts were linked to RQ2 and the concept of resiliency. These prompt cards were laid out on the table in front of the respondent in no particular order with the following verbatim question for each of the two interview questions:

Interview question 5: “These are some of the concepts of well-being people say are either present or not during a leadership transition. I’m curious how these fit into your experience. Pick

a card, one at a time, and tell me how that concept fit or didn't fit into your experience of the transition."

Interview question 6: "These concepts are what some believe contribute to resiliency through change and difficulty. I'm curious how these fit into your experience. Pick a card, one at a time, and tell me how that concept fit or didn't fit into your experience of the transition."

In addition to capturing the respondent's response to the prompts, I also noted which card was chosen first, second, third, and so on. Once input into computer software, I then tagged and categorized these data for unique phenomenological analysis focused not on details of the unplanned event itself but on the lived experiences associated with that event. Coding methods then allowed for cross-reference and searches to find themes among participant responses. Some anticipated themes were directly connected to the theory of well-being, such as Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement. Other anticipated themes for coding were directly linked to the concept of resiliency, such as Forgiveness, Gratitude, Hope, and Optimism. An anticipated code special to a group of ministry leaders reflected a deep commitment to a spiritual calling. Interview question seven allowed for the respondent to divulge further anticipated themes:

Interview question 7a: "Is there anything else you want to share about what contributed to your remaining on staff during a season of unplanned leadership transition?"

The final interview question sought to learn the self-reported level of relational closeness between the respondent and Pastor A, who transitioned leadership. Interview question 7b: "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is no relational connection and 10 is a deep friendship, how close were you to Pastor A?"

The strategic interview grid of questions can be found in Appendix A. The interview protocol was field tested using an expert panel of five individuals. This panel was made up of one current staff member of the case study church not in the prospective respondent group, one key leader familiar with the case study as a former consultant to its leadership, and three members of the board of directors of a nonprofit ministry that serves churches in unplanned transitions. This testing provided clarity and direction to ensure that interview questions aligned with the research questions the study seeks to answer.

In content coding the individual interviews I utilized the specific methodological processes of in vivo coding (Strauss, 1987) and values coding (Saldaña, 2014). These coding methods allowed participants to define their experiences in the context of their perspectives while making connections according to everyday language and expression. Data were examined, coded, and then placed into categories to connect the relationships of those categories to ground the research findings. The research findings contributed to knowledge regarding how well-being habits associated with resiliency positively influenced the experience of ministry leaders during an unplanned pastoral leadership transition. Using the values coding method outlined by Saldaña (2014), I utilized a streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry. This model began with codes derived directly from respondent interview responses with any subcodes identified. Examples of such codes were words common throughout the interviews that reflect such things as *excited*, *scared*, *uncertain*, *grieved*, *angry*, *overwhelmed*, or ministry language such as *called*, *faithful*, *grace*, *forgiveness*, *job*, or *workload*. The data then determined the specific codes. After I gleaned each code, I placed them in a category or subcategory, which captured common concepts. Examples of categories reflected the research questions emphasis on well-being, positive relationships, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Once the

categories had been established, themes were noted. Some anticipated themes from the current study reflected the characteristics of resiliency such as a desire to process forgiveness, a sense of hope for a fresh start, gratitude for specific people or event, optimism for the future of ministry objectives. Some themes were more about grief over the loss of leadership, uncertainty about the future, or fear of the unknown. The data produced identified themes used to complete the codes-to-theory model by presenting assertions clarified in the findings.

**Materials and Instruments**

A strategic grid for the interview questions promoted consistency in the interviewing process and allowed for data to be gathered on each specific and direct research question, noting the connection to Seligman's theory and concept of resiliency (Appendix A).

The process for interviewing included face-to-face, audio-recorded structured questions, which allowed each participant to create their narrative of the thoughts, feelings, memories, and attached meanings of the events this case study sought to understand.

I used a laptop with Microsoft 365 Word Documents and Excel to store the collected qualitative data. Both systems were password- and firewall-protected. I used a Roland audio-recorder to capture audio of the individual interviews, and transcripts created in a Word document were produced from those recorded interviews. In addition to audio clips and transcripts, I wrote and collected notes of observations taken during the interviews. Microsoft Excel was utilized for tagging and analysis of the data within a searchable spreadsheet. I archived data in a password-protected server and handled it according to professional, ethical guidelines.

As a case study, I anticipated access to participants over 90 days for conducting interviews and building the narrative datasets necessary for the study. The interview questions stemmed from Seligman's WBT and the literature around resiliency.

**Researcher's Role**

The focus of this case study was of interest to me due to the level of relationship and roles I experienced during the period studied for this research project. For 17 years, I served as a pastor on the case study church staff. From 2003 to 2020, I built relational equity with the other pastors and staff. My role morphed over the years, but I always had an open-door policy as a chaplain to the church staff, an unofficial title but a spoken benefit from which staff members could take advantage. Thus, I was in good relationship with the elders, pastors, ministry directors, and support staff. I was one of three pastors asked to contribute input for the future leadership direction during the period under study. Currently, I am not a staff member of the church but attend and serve as a volunteer in the ministries of the case study church. I resigned from my staff position in 2020 because of a call to focus on another ministry opportunity. It was not a resignation prompted by frustration, anger, bitterness, or hurt. I remain committed to the case study church through volunteer service, availability, attendance, and support of the new pastor's vision of the church.

I am informally consulted by staff members when they seek advice on care plans and conflicts among church members. There is no formal or dual relationship with the church outside my chosen place of worship. I have no formal influence or position to coerce participation in the research, which was presented to potential participants as a volunteer opportunity.

My role as researcher in this case study could be characterized as a participant observer, having been involved in the case study church and now in a passive role of observer collecting

the narratives of respondents' shared experience in their own words. I obfuscated the findings and offered no results to individuals or groups of parties associated with the case study church. Only aggregate data from this study's research have been made available and presented broadly.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study received ACU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix E). Considering ethical concerns and full transparency, the worship pastor of the case study church is my son, who was also on staff during the transition. Although he was not in a pastoral role, out of concern for potential risk to the trustworthiness and possible biased influence, his input was not gathered in the research for this project.

This study required the need to address specific bias potential to the research. First was design bias, where interview questions only emphasized the strengths and positive effects of well-being or resiliency. To counter design bias, the interview questions related to well-being and resiliency were worded to allow either positive or negative responses to the prompts. A second potential bias needing to be addressed was objectivity bias. Since I have personal experience with the subject matter, my lived experience can become a filter for others' responses. To counter objectivity bias, the data used were that of each participant's lived experience as the study's methodology determined the filter for collection, analysis, and synthesis.

Access to the church as a case study was granted through the current senior pastor and chairman of the elder board. Both individuals granted permission for the case study to commence, and they provided documentation of approval before the project continued. Qualified staff members received an email, as previously mentioned, giving them the opportunity to

voluntarily participate after signing a consent and release agreement as noted in Appendix C. Data were not collected prior to the IRB approving the study.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

This population assumed a level of honesty not dependent on fear of retribution or vocational recourse since the interview data I collected was done anonymously. The reporting of findings was done so that it did not connect the identity of participants to their responses. Research for this study was limited in that the shared experience under study was not the unplanned departure of the senior pastor but the shared experience of remaining on staff from the beginning to the end of the transition period. The unplanned leadership departure was the catalyst for the time under study. Therefore, this study did not include staff members in the identified timeframe, who subsequently left the church for several other reasons amid or since the transition. That portion of the demographic would be a point of consideration for future research but is outside the scope of those in this study that remained in their ministry roles throughout the leadership transition.

Similarly, this study did not include all 52 current church staff members. The study utilized a sampling technique to limit the number of respondents to those employed during and after the unplanned leader transition event whose job demands were increased, expectations raised, and responsibility intensified. The above explanation of the ethical consideration was a further limiting factor. This case study delimited respondents to the timeframe between April 14, 2019, to March 22, 2021, focusing on their processing of it in terms of potential well-being and resiliency. I acknowledge another limiting concept regarding the influence of time as a possible factor in respondent's reinterpreting and potential reframing of events looking back to recall their

experiences. This study cannot claim causation but does draw correlations between factors measured through the narrative of shared experience.

**Summary**

This study aimed to explore the habits of well-being among ministry leaders having experienced an unplanned pastoral leadership transition from its beginning to its end. How would ministry leaders who witnessed this disruption and remained on staff describe how it impacted their well-being and resiliency?

I conducted the research using methods of interviewing participants that were on staff during the unplanned transition and remained engaged on staff through the dates noted for the leadership transition. I coded and processed data according to validated processes for data collection. Using this method provided a more robust pool of responses to gather insight into the role and relationship of well-being during times of difficulty specific to resiliency during leadership transitions in the church. This research hopes to contribute to the future conversation that may help other ministry leaders facing organizational distress in the church.

How important is personal and spiritual well-being for the longevity of ministry leadership through difficult ministry seasons? How is well-being manifest in times of crisis? Are there connections that can be made between this church case study and other church leadership transitions? The methodological approach for this study helped answer these questions and created awareness for further research. Chapter 4 begins this research by applying the methods outlined in this chapter.

# Chapter 4: Results

This chapter is structured to reveal details of the research design used in the current study context. With a focus on Seligman's WBT, the study explored possible correlations between well-being and resiliency among ministry leaders that experienced an unplanned pastoral leadership transition in the church. This chapter defines how the methodology and design provided data that answered this study's two research questions:

**RQ1**: How does an unplanned leadership transition affect habits of well-being (e.g., positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement)?

**RQ2**: How are habits of well-being related to characteristics of resiliency (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism)?

This chapter details the research philosophy, research type, research strategy, time horizon, sampling strategy, data collection method, the process for analysis, and techniques used to find results. Discussions about past literature, interpretation of the results, and recommendations are not covered here but in Chapter 5.

## Research Design

The context for the design of this study reflects on the departure of a senior pastor as the church leader. This leader is referred to through this study as Pastor A. Respondents to the interviews were those in ministry positions in the case study church as elders, pastors, and support staff during the leadership transition from April 2019 to March 2021. This research explicitly looked at habits of well-being outlined in the PERMA model presented as positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement in the Seligman (2000) WBT under the umbrella of positive psychology (Donaldson & Ko, 2010). Additionally, the research focused on resiliency traits of forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism as noted in Campbell

and Bauer (2021). As a case study, the participants answered the same interview questions with a purposeful design in their wording and positioning in the interviews. In this way, the research design is descriptive in its data collection, methodology, and analysis approach.

**Research Philosophy, Strategy, and Time Horizon**

This research was a qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological, single case study focused on characteristics of well-being and resiliency amid an unplanned leadership transition in the church. The philosophy undergirding the current study hinged on the belief that individuals with a shared experience provide unique perspectives to their lived experience, which have the potential to influence an organization beyond the individual. The qualitative nature of this study sought to find meanings attached to individual narratives. The interpretive aspect of this study assumed the subjective nature of individual lived experience in the context of a shared season of time between the leaving of one senior pastor and the hiring of another. This shared event occurred from April 19, 2019, to March 21, 2021.

The subjective nature of individual experiences of the event occurred within a specific historical and social construct to which participants attached meaning. The interview questions provided an outlet for respondents to provide their perspectives on these constructs in light of the focus on well-being and resiliency. Additionally, questions about time in overall ministry, time in their current role, response to the metaphorical language used for motivation, and a relational closeness scale helped clarify a fuller context that produced themes associated with well-being, resiliency, and leadership issues.

This research included participants within the confines of a single case study. As such, this case provided insight into the circumstances around an unplanned leadership transition of the senior pastor who departed without a succession plan. This case study provided context for

exploring how habits of well-being and resiliency factored into the characteristics, meaning, and possible implications of those habits on ministry leaders who remained on church staff during an unplanned leadership transition.

**Sampling Strategy**

With a large target population of a mega-church staff, I needed a sampling technique to cull the population to saturation. Common sampling methods were considered, such as convenience sampling, self-selected sampling, snowball sampling, purposive sampling, and random sampling. I chose purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling. According to Campbell et al. (2020), "The reason for purposive sampling is the better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research" (p. 652). I limited the sample to those individuals on staff during the transition, who were in positions of influence and represented each of the three areas of leadership in the church: elders, pastors, and support staff. This representation allowed a total potential participant pool of 29 possible respondents. Of the potential respondents, 25 committed to interviews. This representation provided saturation and sufficient data for the study.

The final sample included six elders, 11 pastors, and eight support staff. The demographic represented among the 25 respondents included 14 women and 15 men. This demographic broke down further into specific roles: three female and three male elders, four female and seven male pastors, and seven female and one male support staff. The average time for individuals in overall ministry was 19 years, while the average total time in their current ministry at the case study church was 11 years. Respondents were assigned numbers from 01–025 for anonymity, and quotations here use the respondents' numbers.

**Data Collection Method**

Data were collected during face-to-face interviews and recorded for transcription, coding, and theming. I scheduled and completed the interviews between February and May 2023. Before the interview, participants were presented with a consent and release form explaining the permissions and parameters of the interview process. Of the 25 respondents, all signed the document. All participants agreed to audio recording, with one exception requesting the interview not be recorded. That interview was completed by note-taking method, and results were included in the coding, theming, and analysis process.

I asked each participant the same interview questions in the same order. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour, depending on the level of detail the respondent offered. After each interview, I transcribed the recording into document form using Word Dictate. I then edited the document for accuracy, spelling, and syntax while listening to each recording. Once the transcript accurately portrayed each participant's responses, I listened to the interview again while marking transcripts with coding concepts using in vivo coding and the exact verbiage of respondents. Another read of the transcripts provided further editing to redact all personally identifying information. This final edit created a 166-page, 52,000-word collection of transcribed interviews. Each transcript was searched for quotes noted for placement under common themes formulated from the coded data.

In vivo coding produced the following list of common words: confusing, chaotic, troubling, unsettled, sad, unsure, worrisome, hopeful, tears, stressful, hard, consuming, exhausting, emotional, concerning, fearful, uncertain, frustrating, evolving, challenging, alarming, trainwreck, bonding, heartbreaking, energizing, revealing, encouraging, painful, difficult, demanding, overwhelming, pressure, heavy, tense, hell, odd, blessing, battering,

broken, angst, crazy, struggle, herded, transition, experimentation, turbulent, hurtful, surrendered, okay. I collated then generalized these words into the themes noted below, which I then discuss in detail in Chapter 5.

**Data Analysis Techniques**

A total of 10 themes emerged from the data. One theme was captured using the inductive method and the deductive method produced nine themes from this study. Five of the nine themes were specific to well-being: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement. Four of the nine themes were relevant to resilience. They were Forgiveness, Gratitude, Hope, and Optimism. These nine themes reflect the interview questions from which data were collected specific to PERMA and resiliency prompt cards, respectively. I presented these prompts to participants with a request to answer if the concept fit or didn't fit with their lived experience during the transition. From their responses, comparisons were made across elder, pastor, and support staff roles to receive more robust results pertinent to the study.

Data also included participants' lived experiences related to time in overall ministry, time in current ministry, frequency of interaction with Pastor A, relational closeness with Pastor A, and metaphor language used as either a motivator or demotivator in time of crisis. Interview questions addressed these factors in the following way: In the interview I asked about the frequency of interaction: "How would you define your working relationship to Pastor A in terms of interaction, daily, regularly, sporadically, or rarely?" I also asked about relational closeness in the interview: "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is *no relational connection*, and 10 represents *deep friendship*, how close were you to Pastor A?" Metaphor communication in the interview was asked, "How did you hear and what did you experience when the staff was called to be 'all-hands-on-deck'?"

## Results

Themes for well-being and resiliency were identified as deductive in that they were directly asked as part of the interview process. I presented each concept on individual 3x5 notecards with the characteristic and a definition written on a card. Cards were placed in front of the respondents, and I asked them to choose one at a time to recount if the concept fit or didn't fit into that season of transition. I placed five cards in front of them during the well-being portion of the interview representing the themes Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement. I placed four cards before them during the resiliency portion representing Forgiveness, Gratitude, Hope, and Optimism. These themes are directly linked to the research questions for this study.

**RQ1:** How does an unplanned leadership transition affect habits of well-being (e.g., positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement)?

My analysis of overall well-being found that among the 25 participants, one reported not to have any of the five characteristics of well-being, one had only one of the five, three participants reported having two, seven reported three, nine reported having four characteristics of well-being, and four had all five characteristics.

### *Well-Being – Positive Emotions*

Examples of positive emotions related to well-being include joy, love, compassion, fulfillment, hope, interest, amusement, and gratitude, according to Seligman (2012).

In response to the lived experiences of positive emotions participants acknowledged the pain of the situation:

> They [positive emotions] were hard to experience because of the pain, and everybody had different levels of pain related to the personal and professional connection with Pastor A

> or their own personal history. So, honestly, I think I was getting frustrated when people would try and bring too many positive emotions into what I felt like was not assessing reality for many on our staff. (Respondent 09)

By contrast, Respondent 011 said:

> Yes, positive emotions did fit into my experience. I feel like, especially, in the area of compassion and love and even gratefulness for the people that were stepping up and keeping the place going. And hope. Yeah, I would say "yes," it fit in.

Positive emotions were evenly reported as making up half of responses among all three groups with six of 11 pastors noting fit, and three of six elders and four of eight support staff claiming positive emotions fit their lived experience.

***Well-Being – Engagement***

Engagement is the state an individual experiences when living in the present moment, focused entirely on task (Seligman, 2012).

Examples of engagement responses included the following statement: "For me personally, I don't think I'd ever been more engaged and more present in what was going on here" (Respondent 01).

However, this response was not reflected in other's lived experience: "I would say the engagement part, there wasn't a sense of anyone giving you a great churchwide "this is where we're headed" moment; there was nobody to do that. Who was that person supposed to be that gives us the charge going forward now because the head, other than Jesus, departed, and there really wasn't anyone. I didn't feel confident enough to engage." (Respondent 02).

Engagement had a fit in 17 of the 25 lived experiences of all participants.

***Well-Being – Relationships***

In the context of this study relationships are defined as strengthening or maintaining intimate connections, like sharing good news or responding enthusiastically to the presence of others (Seligman, 2012).

Respondents were mixed on the influence of relationships:

> During this time, we've always had a pretty open relationship in terms of just being able to voice frustration, me voicing frustration. I don't know what's going on, you know? And so it was good to have others point me to Christ, and to not let my negativity take me down that dark hole of discouragement. (Respondent 017).

Nevertheless, others aligned more with remarks similar to Respondent 020, who lamented the loss of relationships: "I felt that I was losing relationships more than gaining them. So, I think that this was probably a big hit to me. I didn't have really anybody in my corner."

All eight support staff reported a fit for the characteristic of relationships.

***Well-Being – Meaning***

In the context of this study, meaning defined as life purpose through which individuals devote their lives to something greater than themselves (Seligman, 2012).

The well-being characteristic of meaning received mixed responses, initially creating concern for those called to vocational ministry in the church. Respondent 022 put it this way:

> Wrestled a ton with that because I came to [case study church] because of alignment and I had never experienced synergy in ministry with somebody like I did with Pastor A. So, observing this feel that there's a pull for changing things while we have a chance, my concern was we don't really know what that change is going to actually do. So, with the meaning part, I think where I was at the level in the organization, I was out of a ton of

conversations and so I didn't have the confidence or even the context to know if we still had alignment.

Respondent 023 noted the following:

Part of this for me, I grew in selflessness through this whole process because it wasn't about me or my way and in terms of devoting your life to something greater than yourself, I'd say that helping be a part of the church through a transitional season, pastoral loss, and coming out the other side as still a viable entity was valuable even though it wasn't a great achievement, it had meaning because I believe the church is bigger than any one person, and the church is also timeless.

Support staff held the highest fit to the theme of Meaning as five of six reported positively on the characteristic. This contrasts with the lowest fit to Meaning reflected in four of the 11 pastors acknowledging positive meaning.

***Well-Being – Achievement***

Achievement is characterized by results accomplished when individuals work toward their goals and achieve mastery, competence, or success (Seligman, 2012).

My personal goals were nonexistent. So, your goals became corporate goals, yeah. I don't feel like there was success because I think all of the goals that we were trying to go towards just caused more confusion and frustration. (Respondent 025).

Put a different way, Respondent 012 said the following:

We were just trying a lot of different things and some stuff worked and some didn't. We haven't thought about achieving, it was really, just surviving. So, I guess that's what I would, for this time period, that's what I would say about achievement. That's probably a low bar. But it was the bar, nonetheless.

There were positive lived experiences of achievement. For example, Respondent 09 noted the following:

> I feel like we achieved a lot in spite of the challenges that was before us... resiliency would pivot, transitioning quickly to meet the needs of what a body of believers could look like. Personally, I think it was in a season that was difficult to celebrate what you were achieving cause it was underlying what made it feel squishy.

Achievement produced a spread between six of 11 pastors who reported fit, seven of eight support staff reporting fit, and four of six elders reported fit to the theme of Achievement during that season of unplanned leadership transition.

**RQ2:** How are habits of well-being related to characteristics of resiliency (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism)?

Analysis of overall resiliency among participants found none of the respondents lacked any of the traits of resiliency. Stated positively, all respondents experienced at least one trait of resiliency. One participant noted having one trait, four had two, 12 of the 25 participants had three, and eight reported having all four traits of resiliency.

### *Resiliency – Forgiveness*

Forgiveness, according to Campbell and Bauer (2021), is an intentional act of pardon or release from injury, offense, or debt culminating in releasing someone from words or actions that would impede the relationship of those involved.

Responses showing connection to the theme of Forgiveness were mixed; respondent 05 did not mince words: “Well, there is undealt with relational crap. Unfortunately, I really don’t know how to move forward with that.”

Similarly, the response from Respondent 02 provided clarification:

> I've struggled with this somewhat and partly that had to do with maybe the way things were being led in the church. I saw the effect it was having on people that I knew were really great believers and I thought "cease and desist, please."

Respondents communicated the theme of Forgiveness by processing through the lens of Pastor A, with respondent 07 stating: "I'm pretty sure that I haven't forgiven Pastor A. And it's funny because I feel like I could. I could probably forgive him. Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's a tough one." While others, like respondent 016, communicated: "I didn't feel the need to forgive Pastor A as he didn't personally offend me, so it was unnecessary during that time."

The reported lack of forgiveness fell within two camps: Those who could not forgive due to hurt or woundedness and those who reported a lack of forgiveness because there was no offense to forgive. Within the role of pastor, one-third reported that forgiveness fit in their experience, whereas 64% said forgiveness did not fit. Of that 64%, all but one pastor could not forgive because he felt hurt or that he was wounded too deeply.

***Resiliency – Gratitude***

According to Campbell and Bauer (2021), gratitude is a deep sense of thankfulness for individuals or circumstances.

Responses that fit with this theme provided insight into the many facets of relationships, as noted by Respondent 017:

> I was very grateful for my friendships on staff and the people that pointed me to Christ in those moments and for those deep friendships and how we would check in on each other.
>
> I was also grateful for my life group because that part was tricky to evaluate how much to say and how much not to say.

Gratitude provided perspective for Respondent 020:

> Yeah, I wouldn't change it for the world. I mean those years were an incredible run of [God] growing me up as a leader. There were leadership skills that I didn't have coming into that job, that I had to change. I'm grateful for all of it.

There was also a practical side of the Gratitude theme, according to Respondent 025, who said, "I'm so grateful that in May, June, July of 2020, I did not lose my job. And I'm so thankful that the [case study church] elder board in the lack of a leadership felt like it was important to fight for."

Not every respondent found Gratitude fitting in their lived experience, as noted by Respondent 08, "Although I'll eventually get there, it's a curvy road to gratitude because I have to do a lot of processing and acceptance before I can get to gratitude."

All six elders reported feelings of gratitude during that season. In addition, the Gratitude theme was reported by 10 of 11 pastors and six of eight support staff.

***Resiliency – Hope***

According to Campbell and Bauer (2021), hope is holding out the possibility of outcomes in present circumstances when emotions are mixed.

Respondent 04 offered the following:

> Yeah, I think I had hope on most days, but not on every day. That's because there's a sense of loss. There's also a sense of you can't see the future just yet. You're caught in the middle of it. But I will say that part of it is having hope, having a proper expectation.

Respondent 08 put hopelessness into perspective according to their lived experience, "It's in things not making sense that I struggled with hopelessness, and the struggle is because if others don't change, you know, it just felt hopeless."

Along with the theme of Gratitude, Hope claimed the highest number of positive responses of the combined nine factors of well-being and resiliency with 23 of the 25 participants reporting fit.

***Resiliency – Optimism***

Campbell and Bauer (2021) define optimism as positive expectations about the future concerning emotions, perseverance, problem-solving, and healthy achievement.

Respondent 010 captured his lived experience of optimism with these words:

> There were times where I was genuinely excited for our future and I was like, I just don't even know where we're going or what's going to happen, but I believe that there's a better day ahead for us, better than what we were currently in and that this would pass. And we needed to know that, like, this isn't forever. I think that's what helped me.

Respondent 015 showed the angst of clarity in that season regarding optimism:

> I don't know. It's interesting. I tend to go negative on that. Did I feel optimistic? To me, that's a feeling of like "it's going to be OK." I don't know. We didn't walk around going, "It's all gonna work out, it's gonna be OK," cause the heaviness of what we were in. You knew it was going to be OK, so I guess deep down I had optimism. I didn't have hopelessness. So, I mean I guess if I had to say was I optimistic or not optimistic, I guess I was optimistic, but it was ground out a lot of times by just "this was so dang hard." I knew the wheels weren't going to come off and stay off. Anyway, God had taken [case study church] too far to let her just die. So, yeah.

Optimism was reported to fit experiences among support staff more so than the other two groups, although each group respectfully reported a positive fit for optimism.

**Other Themes**

In addition to the nine themes directly related to the research questions on well-being and resiliency, one additional theme sprang from the interviews using the inductive method of taking the responses of participants without direct guardrails around a reply. This theme encapsulated Leadership Issues that respondents said contributed significantly to their thoughts and feelings during the events of that season. Responses that produced this theme and subthemes came from three interview questions:

(1) What word or words would you use to describe the events between Pastor A leaving and Pastor B arriving?

(2) Thinking back to that season, how was the news of Pastor A leaving delivered, and how would you describe your initial reaction?

(3) In the months that followed, what thoughts and feelings were you experiencing?

Table 1 shows the theme and four subthemes associated with leadership issues.

**Table 1**

*Four Subthemes to Leadership Issues*

| Leadership Issues | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| | Decision-making failures |
| | Disunity among leadership |
| | Lack of communication |
| | Faulty systems/structure |

The Leadership Issues theme was represented among elders, pastors, and support staff. The subthemes became commonly expressed concerns with similar verbiage across respondents. Notable examples include the response of Respondent 01:

> I think there was a sense of we'd always talked about unity and how important that was on our team and there was probably a little bit of disunity and just the way we were structured as a church. And I think that was for me, we all had different feelings of how leading should go and there were moments it felt a bit like we were being bulldozed, because we got to get things done, we got to get that done and get this done; let's make these decisions. And it really felt like, "can we just take a breath."

Respondent 017 pinpointed the frustration among many participants:

> I know I felt abandoned. I felt like there were a lot of decisions that were made in the dark, like in a backroom somewhere, separated in a way from the rest of us, but had a profound effect on us, and then we were expected to figure out how to triage the mess that came out of that. There was a lot of angst and other things surrounding us, and I'd say a lot of distraction because we're dealing with all this other stuff and how the system was going to function now and how the staff was going to function now. Who was in charge? There was definitely a vacuum in terms of leadership and authority.

Respondent 018 spoke about the following:

> A lot of conversations trying to guess what happened, a lot of talk amongst people, which then led to an unhealthy environment, a toxic environment of any leadership decision that happened, there were immediately meetings after meetings. There were things going on in which it was like, "Oh my gosh, let's go debrief what just happened because that was terrible", at every level. So, it really created, I think, an atmosphere of distrust.

Communication was also an issue as the same respondent put it, "I would say that the lack of clarity and lack of communication at times made things feel hopeless here. I also think we often make the decision that is easiest, not what is always best.

According to Respondent 022, input on decisions that affected them were not sought, “I felt like my voice was really removed. It’s now fresh on leadership’s mind, and now here’s what they want to do, and there wasn’t any consulting with me.”

Leadership Issues included the concept of succession planning. Respondent 025 shared, “I remember feeling like we were lacking direction as a church, and I also remember feeling disappointment in the leadership team with not having a plan. It felt very weird to me that there was not a succession plan.”

Respondent 017 summed up the leadership issues as follows:

> I still believed in what [case study church] stood for, the problem was, I didn’t know if we were going to actually get there or not. And I was more worried about the disunity and the dysfunction that I saw but still it was never a question of what the church stood for, it was always a question of are we going to be able to execute and get there . . . So, there’s the system and then there’s the vision and I didn’t have a problem with the vision, I just had a problem with the system.

The Leadership Issues theme and subthemes were the nuanced backstories of the lived experiences of each respondent. Respondent 023 had this to say:

> Ultimately, the elder board had to make a decision. The elder board made a decision based on their best available inputs and spiritual discernment, but it was a combination of different, what I would say, fractal patterns of who thought what was best and a lot of inputs were taken and essentially, in my opinion, what happened was leadership just sort of existed in the void. In a senior pastor void, we just sort of existed as best as possible. Fractals.

**Methodological Limitations**

There is a limitation in the use of purposive sampling, because I chose the respondents for their ability to provide data most relevant to the aim of the case study. The process of choosing only some staff left others out of the research. Notably, the study focused on those working on staff during the period between Pastor A leaving and Pastor B arriving. Therefore, the purposive sampling eliminated a larger pool of staff members that had experienced only a portion of that season.

Another limitation is inherent to case study generalizability. Results from this study can only offer insights into this case and cannot generalize from this sample to any other cases or a larger population. Therefore, the lack of generalizability is a methodological limitation of the case study.

Qualitative research methodology itself presents limitations rooted in the process of analysis based on the researcher's assumptions, interests, perceptions, and general biases. The research protocol applied to this study affirmed the trustworthiness of the findings and was developed to minimize bias and assure reliability.

Another limitation of this study concerns extenuating circumstances as factors not intentionally pursued during the interview process. Some respondents cited drama over COVID, family tragedy through the death of a loved one, trauma of a personal diagnosis, and effects of social concerns specific to the issue of race relations as factors potentially affecting well-being and resilience. Future inquiries concerning these factors may produce additional correlations valuable to similar studies.

## Conclusion

This case study produced robust results of selected elders, pastors, and support staff who reported on their lived experience of the five pillars of the PERMA model representing the theory of well-being and the four traits of resiliency. Themes emerged from the narrative of lived experiences of participants' time in overall ministry, time in ministry at the case study church, frequency of interaction, metaphor language used for motivation, and self-reported closeness to Pastor A. The lived experiences reflected participants' angst as participant 019 stated, "I think overall I had a fear for where the church would be. Will we as a church survive? Will my job be here? I remember processing through those things." The atmosphere in which this study provided results was one of uncertainty and warrants deeper exploration of the findings related to habits of well-being and traits of resiliency in pursuit of answering this study's research questions. In Chapter 5, I present these findings, connect them to the literature, interpret the results, and provide suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This research is a qualitative, interpretive, phenomenological, single case study focused on well-being characteristics and resiliency traits amid an unplanned leadership transition in a large, suburban, nondenominational church. The study is specific to one case study church whose senior pastor resigned in April 2019. Respondents were elders, pastors, and support staff who remained on staff during the leadership transition from the April 2019 departure to the hiring a new senior pastor in March 2021. This limited participants to their shared experience of a senior pastor leadership transition.

This study sought to address the identified problem of an unplanned change in pastoral leadership that disturbed other ministry leaders' well-being and resiliency (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013; Pomerleau et al., 2020). Therefore, this qualitative single case study aimed to understand individual well-being and resiliency during the season of transition between one pastor leaving and the new pastor arriving. This transition period served as the framework for questions around the shared experience of each respondent.

Seligman's WBT was essential to this study as a theoretical framework (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The WBT identifies five essential elements represented in the mnemonic PERMA: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and achievement(A). The WBT originated in the social sciences and is a central concept in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The WBT has helped scholars and researchers organize a framework of positive rather than debilitating factors as a conceptual lens.

Core findings reflected in the participant interviews were 10 themes, nine of them associated with the studies' two research questions.

**RQ1:** How does an unplanned leadership transition affect habits of well-being (e.g., positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement)?

This research question uses the verb *affect*, often associated with causal language in research. Since this was a qualitative study, causation was not sought. Instead, we looked for correlations through a post-only design noting the effect of a shared experience on personal lived experiences of that season. During the interview process, I intentionally guided participants back to the season using the interview matrix as a strategic grid. I believe, based on observation, that participants were able to reconnect with their emotional state during that season. When needed, at times during the interview, respondents were redirected from present responses back to that season when their answers reflected a more accurate connection to the purpose of this study.

The first research question addressed well-being characteristics specific to positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. These five characteristics became the themes by which respondents reported their unique lived experiences with various expressions of whether each characteristic fit or did not fit into their experience during that season.

**RQ2:** How are habits of well-being related to characteristics of resiliency (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism)?

This second research question produced themes associated with forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism. Respondents reported each of these resiliency traits as to whether they fit or did not fit with the respondents' lived experience. Findings for each theme reflected various levels of fit.

In addition to the nine themes directly related to the two research questions, one additional theme sprang from the interviews. This theme was captured as Leadership Issues,

which respondents said contributed significantly to their thoughts and feelings during the events of that season. These leadership issues referred to the management team and decision makers during that season and produced four subthemes expressed through the nine main themes: Decision-making failures, disunity among leadership, lack of communication, and faulty systems/structure. Respondent 04 captured leadership issues with the following:

> So now you're dealing with angst of who's the new person, and even the people that you've been working with that are now in a different level of leadership that may not be coming from the same perspective that you are. What exactly are you trying to figure out? Who calls the shots? Do I trust them? Do I still trust the elders in the way that I always have? I don't know.

This study also examined the responses of participants' lived experiences related to their time in overall ministry, time in ministry at the case study church, frequency of work interaction with Pastor A, perceived relational closeness with Pastor A, and metaphor language used as either a motivator or demotivator in time of crisis.

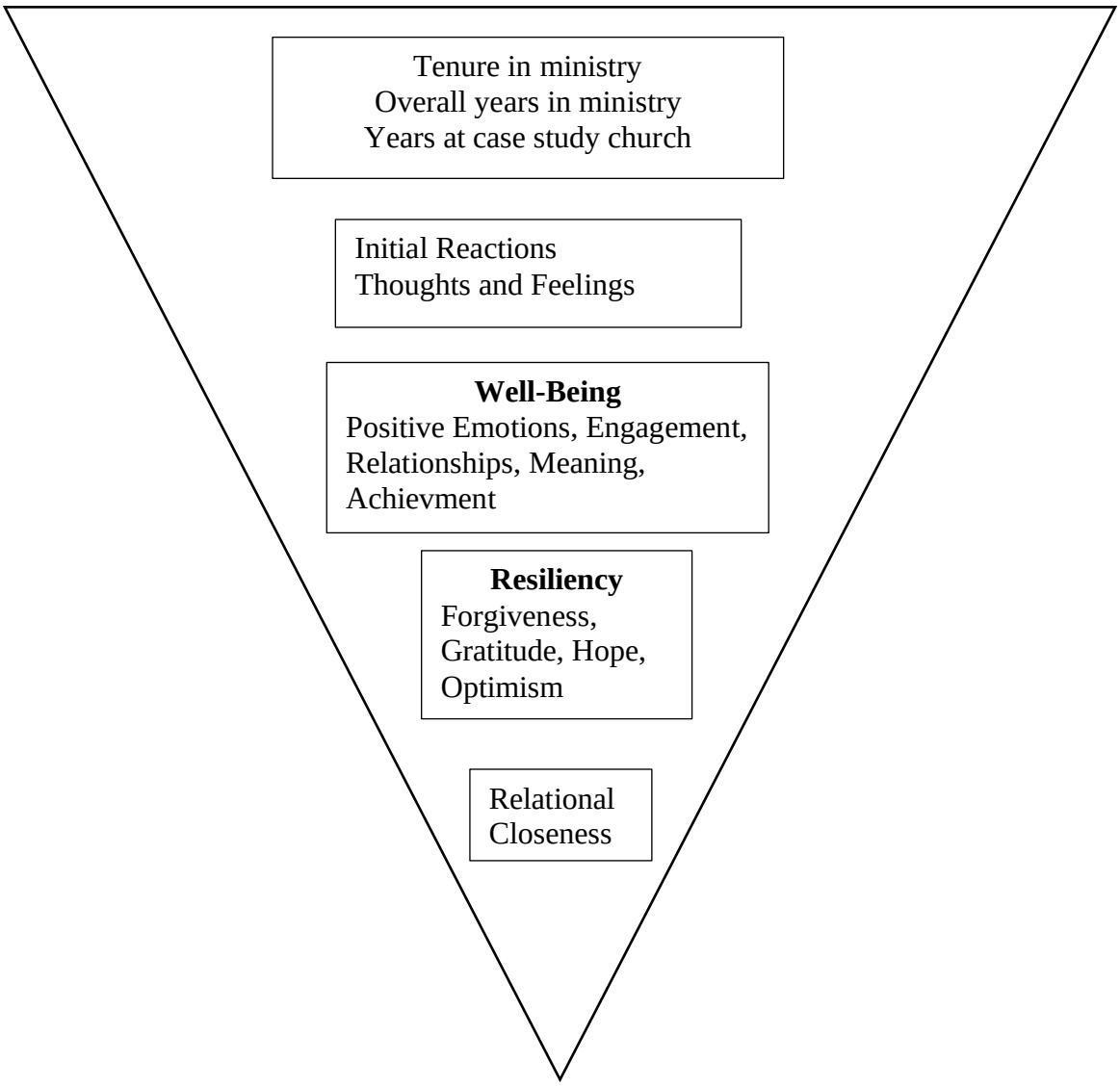
This chapter provides clarity and interpretation of these results and findings with sections on discussion, implications, limitations, and recommendations. All quotations in this chapter reflect the words and thoughts of the participants and not those of the researcher.

**Discussion of Findings**

The sampling for this study allowed for role distribution to be analyzed. The role breakdown of the 25 respondents was six elders, 11 pastors, and eight support staff. Averages are expressed as percentages attributed to each of these groupings. The interview questions used for this study provide a path for understanding the data. Figure 2 shows the basic interview question groupings.

**Figure 2**

*Interview Matrix Funnel*




Appendix A provides the specific interview questions used for this study. Six of the eight questions provided background, demographic, and general insight to clarify and define respondents' answers to the two interview questions on well-being and resiliency. These contextual and informative questions pertained to time in overall ministry, time in ministry at the current case study church, level of interaction with Pastor A, response to the metaphorical

language used for motivation, and perceived relational closeness to Pastor A. These concepts serve as the context for understanding more deeply the characteristics of well-being and traits of resiliency which this study's research questions sought to answer.

### *Tenure in Ministry*

The first two questions each participant answered were related to time in overall ministry and time in the current ministry role at the case study church. The average time in overall ministry of the 25 respondents was 19 years, ranging from 5 to 35 years.

The average time in their current ministry at the case study church was 11 years, ranging from 5 to 35 years. This question was included to determine if the length of time in a ministry context contributed to responses of well-being and resiliency. The factor of tenure can be seen in the results noting that more than twice the relational closeness was associated among those with longer tenure. The longer the relationship, the higher it seems was the perceived closeness in the relationship.

Tenure in ministry at the case study church produced nearly twice as much positive response to metaphor communication, one-third more well-being characteristic of engagement, and one-third more achievement. Unexpected findings related to tenure were that the resiliency trait of forgiveness fit only 38% among those with longer tenure in contrast to 67% of shorter tenured participants. Additionally, results found that 25% fewer participants with longer tenure were associated with the well-being characteristic of relationship. Relationship was less represented among a quarter of longer tenured respondents.

People longer in their roles were more engaged. Respondent 013 stated:

> We definitely were engaged just trying to make everything feel as normal as possible, so I mean of course initially when Pastor A left it was to me on one level, I mean we were engaged, we were trying to assure people that everything was going to be OK.

This study found that the longer a participant had been in their role, the less frequently they reflected the resiliency traits of hope and forgiveness.

When asked about their level of work interaction with Pastor A—daily, regularly, sporadically, or rarely—the results weighed heavily between sporadically and rarely, with 16 of the 25 respondents falling into these categories evenly at eight in each category. I asked this question to determine if a closer working relationship with a departed leader may or may not influence the well-being and resiliency of church staff.

***Initial Reactions***

Participants were asked to provide a word or words that described the events between Pastor A leaving and Pastor B arriving. This question provided insight into the thoughts and feelings respondents were experiencing as they reflected on that specific season. Several words were used with *stressful* and *confusing* as the two descriptors consistently repeated. The list of other responses included: chaotic, troubling, unsettled, sad, unsure, worrisome, hopeful, hard, consuming, exhausting, emotional, concerning, fearful, uncertain, frustrating, evolving, challenging, alarming, train-wreck, heartbreaking, revealing, painful, difficult, demanding, overwhelming pressure, heavy, tense, Hell, odd, battering, broken, crazy, struggle, turbulent, and hurtful. Some responses were more positive and optimistic, such as energizing, encouraging, bonding, and blessing. However, the current study responses produced overwhelming findings that align with existing literature that note leadership transitions in the church can be disruptive

for the congregation and the remaining church staff members (Epstein et al., 2020; Milstein et al., 2020).

The interview clarified these responses when I asked participants to describe their initial response to hearing the news of Pastor A leaving. I asked this question for its relevance in noting the mindset that influenced responses and reactions in the immediacy of an unplanned leadership transition. Responses included descriptors such as *gutted*, *dread*, *relief*, and *feeling okay*. The descriptive words used by participants reflected the common signs of grief as their stories unfolded. This finding aligns with Feldman (2014), whose research contends that "the common theme to disruptions of the self, occurring in response to change, is loss. Change may force people into new roles and new ways of doing things" (p. 673). Forced change creates tension between time for adjustment and the need for letting go of familiar ways of functioning. Feldman (2014) clarified, "People with apparently healthy personality structures encounter significant difficulties in adapting to new situations" (p. 673). The thoughts and feelings experienced by participants during that season were reflected in this statement from Respondent 004:

> So there's this realization that seasons that were good are often gone before we know it. And so, there's a feeling of appreciation for what had been, right? And then I think too at some points there were portions of time where I was angry that we were in this chaotic situation, and it wasn't necessarily of our making. At the same time, all those feelings come and go, right?

An interview question related to metaphor communication used for motivation was included to determine if it positively or negatively influenced individual well-being or resilience. The staff meeting where metaphor was used is referred to by participants as the "popsicle stick" meeting where the message of "all-hands-on-deck" was used to call the staff to remain engaged.

Of the 25 respondents, three had no context for the meeting, 11 responded positively, and 11 responded negatively to the metaphorical motivation. Notably, metaphor communication of "all-hands-on-deck" was positively associated with well-being as respondents with a positive reaction to metaphor communication expressed a higher fit for the five well-being characteristics. Said another way, well-being, as constituted by the five PERMA factors, was a strong predictor of responding positively to a call to be "all-hands-on-deck" during an unplanned leadership change. Interestingly, the highest correlation observed with metaphor communication was to the well-being characteristic of positive emotions. Those motivated by metaphor reflected more positive emotions than those not motivated by metaphor communication.

Communication during a leadership transition is critical, especially during what some would consider a crisis call to action. Research suggests that "if [employees] don't know why a new action is necessary, they won't be motivated to help you" (Duarte, 2020, p. 3). Additionally, effective communication can include metaphors that reinforce urgency, because "metaphors play an important role in intentional and deliberate sensemaking" (Hekkala et al., 2018, p. 148). Respondent 002, a pastor, reported this urgency:

> I took it to mean that we've all got to kind of stick our fingers in holes where the boat's leaking wherever they are. It doesn't have to be just our area. It's not appropriate to say, "well, that's not my job," you know, there's areas where we may have to jump in and stick a toe in the hole here and the finger in the hole here and keep the thing from sinking. That's how I took it as a kind of a everybody help in whatever way you can. Don't expect there to be another person or group to take over and do all these things. It may be necessary for you to step in and talk to people or whatever.

However, some researchers note that using metaphors can be a pitfall that leads to ambiguous and imprecise communication (König et al., 2018). One pastor, Respondent 017, captured the dichotomy of metaphor and the angst of how it played into that season:

> The beautiful thing about metaphors is that they do give me a good word picture. The problem is they are subject to interpretation and, at least where I am at, I don't know what more I can give. So now in this crisis mode, you say "all-hands-on-deck" and the thing is, I don't know what ship I'm on, you know, like are we on a submarine or are we on a big giant warship or are we on a little pleasure cruise? Or it feels like a rowboat, you know, because nobody was there to define it and even still you didn't even know what you could say and what you couldn't say. You didn't know because there was so much confusion, you wouldn't even necessarily know how to be "all-hands-on-deck"!

**Well-Being**

The interview question, which produced specific data related to well-being, used enabling techniques as clarified by Roller and Lavrakas (2015), with 3x5 notecards and one word per card from the PERMA model along with a definition for the participant to respond to whether that characteristic fit or did not fit into their lived experience.

The methodology used for this study produced descriptive statistics measured from high to low. With no control group or outside standard, the control became the group average. What was high, and what was low? What fit and did not fit into the lived experience of each respondent? Out of a possible total of 5, the well-being characteristics were highest among the support staff, reflecting 4 of the 5 well-being characteristics, pastors reported the lowest with slightly over 2 characteristics, and elders reported nearly 4 of the 5 well-being characteristics. One participant poignantly stated about well-being: "Our pastors took a hit." Although this

statement is reflected in the findings, it was confirmed that all roles represented taking some degree of a hit to their well-being.

***Positive Emotions***

When asked about positive emotions, respondents found it difficult to process. Respondent 008, a support staff member, stated the following:

> We went through that season where there was random teachers or we rolled through the staff teaching team. The positive emotions I felt going was hope and gratitude. But, you know, the reaction of the body and the way the body seemed to be kind of negative about that and that we didn't have a real senior pastor and the way the elders were pulling strings behind the scenes and stuff, did not have a lot of positive emotion about that as time went on. I think that I grew in my compassion towards others in hard places, but not a lot of positive emotions.

Interestingly, positive emotions were the normalizer among the other four characteristics of well-being, where there was very little difference among roles. One pastor participant recalled the following:

> I would say from April 2019 to October 2021, there were not a lot of [positive emotions]. It was stressful for so many different reasons, I mean workload for some, changes for others, life challenges for others. We were going through the motions, but honestly, I didn't see a lot of love and joy. People were kind. People were never unkind. But this joy, love, fulfillment, hope. Yeah, no (Respondent 013).

An elder commented, "Not a lot of [positive emotions]. I may be just blanking on some of it, but it was just hard." (Respondent 015). A support staff member reported, "We were in survival mode." (Respondent 016).

According to research, positive emotions as a well-being characteristic reflected the mediating factor of prayer and psychological well-being among Christians (Zarzycka, 2021). Twenty of the 25 respondents mentioned the concept of prayer as a factor in positive emotions or as contributing to their well-being. Respondent 015 stated the following:

> I'm always going back to God. God's got it, you know, I mean, it's his church. It's his bride. So surely he's got it. So we would fall back there and pray and pray and pray and pray asking for God's wisdom.

Respondents, such as Respondent 014 were consistently relying on God's moving:

> I think [positive emotions] are just the movement of the Holy Spirit in your life and he met you where you needed, if you needed love that day or compassion or gratitude, there was a sense of gratitude that, hey, we can pay the light bill this month and, you know, people are still here and people still care. So that was the movement of the Holy Spirit.

***Engagement***

Studies that link engagement and well-being to clergy note factors of stress, burnout, and positive engagement in a ministry context, which support the current study (Adams et al., 2017; Bickerton et al., 2015; Case et al., 2020; Cook, 2020; Francis et al., 2017). A response from a support staff participant reflected these factors:

> I get hyper-engaged to the point where disengaging is harder and like it's almost not an engagement, but enmeshment. So then when you do try to disengage, you feel guilty or you feel like you're not giving it your all, and it's in this crisis moment, so you should remember feeling more than worried about being engaged in what was going on. I was probably hyper-engaged, which is why I also felt extra frustration, because it wasn't moving fast enough for me. (Respondent 017).

When asked about engagement, responses tended toward duty and responsibility, with positive engagement fueled by the stress of that season. This support staff member, Respondent 019, stated the following:

> Sunday still had to happen and everything still had to happen. So, engagement for me never changed. I had to be completely focused on the task on a daily basis to make sure that Sundays did not fall through the cracks.

Respondent 018 noted the following:

> For me personally, those years have a lot of blur because of home life was a little bit of a blur and a little bit of chaos at times, right? And then you come into work and it's a little bit of chaos. And so engaging in the weekly rhythm of what's happening for me, Sunday is always coming and then on top of that, there's events that are coming and so continuing to pull those things off and being engaged.

***Relationships***

When asked about relationships, Respondent 020, a pastor, shared that

> I felt that I was losing relationships more than gaining them. So, I think that this was probably a big hit to me. I didn't have really anybody in my corner . . . so I would overall say relationships took a major hit.

This same respondent clarified their feeling:

> I was surprised by some people that I thought had been in all along. And when it got tough, they were out. And I was surprised by others that hadn't been in that long, and they stuck. So that's what I would say as far as relationships… some of your most exceptional people in the organization, for various reasons, begin to leave. (Respondent 020).

Grief was a common theme among participants as they discussed the concept of relationships. However, existing research suggests developing and maintaining healthy relationships is critical to well-being, because "ongoing relationships, especially well-functioning ones in which people feel secure (e.g., appreciated, cared for, and respected) are associated with psychological and physical health" (Van Lange & Columbus, 2021). This security was seen in comments, such as this from Respondent 001:

> I think my relationships kind of solidified as we were kind of struggling with the same stuff. We've got things going on. There was a bond between all of us, even with the chaos that was happening and the emotions that were going on, there was a really strong bond that developed with the team and how we kind of just we were like lifeboats for one another.

Respondent 009, a pastoral staff member, explained this security in relationship as the following:

> [It's] a deep bond with your coworkers able to do church right; what we're ultimately called to do is be the people who are committed to the Lord and create experiences to foster relationships for the Spirit to work. It's been in some of those seasons that that's what the Lord has created. It's relationship connections and hard to keep it on the positive, quite honestly, because there was a lot of bonding around the negative because we had been through something very difficult together, which is very bonding.

This response supports existing research suggesting habits of well-being in the internal dialogue of clergy play a mediating role when under spiritual strain (Zarzycka & Puchalska-Wasyl, 2020).

### *Meaning*

When asked about meaning, there was an unexpected finding in this study that seemed to negate existing research connecting the awe of God to a more profound meaning and purpose (Upenieks & Krause, 2022). We expected a connection to a sense of calling rooted in meaning and achievement. What we found was that meaning and achievement were low across all roles. A pastor participant said, "I don't know that we had a lot of [meaning], but we had some of that, right. The brain drain was enough to feel it and that's a natural thing you're going to have when you have a situation like we had." A similar sentiment was expressed by another pastor participant in this way:

> When I think about meaning, I think about staff culture and we constantly talk about how we're on mission and how we're family and this place has deeper meaning to all of us, right? But that season felt like the opposite of all of that. We were a family, but it felt like we were a super toxic and dysfunctional family. (Respondent 018).

### *Achievement*

When asked about achievement, Respondent 002, a member of the support staff, sensed disappointment in their achievement during that season:

> I have to say I feel like during that time, I think reaction was a better word than achievement. I feel like we were having to always react to the next shoe dropping, you know? In terms of achievement, I can't think of a major project during that period.

Nevertheless, productivity and the ability to attain goals are factors in personal well-being. Research shows that goal-based interventions can improve well-being when focused on goals aligned with personal values and chosen by the individual (Oliver & MacLeod, 2018).

Respondent 025, a support staff member, had the opposite experience:

> I would say I did not have goals because we were all working for the greater good. So, my personal goals were non-existent. So your goals became corporate goals. I don't feel like there was success because I think all of the goals that we were trying to go towards just caused more confusion and frustration."
>
> Another respondent, an elder, clarified and stated the following:
>
> It's almost [as if] you can't see the forest for the trees, right? You're in this crazy situation. There's this one great sense of urgency to bring this to resolution and there's so many factors that play into successful achievement, but I think that absolutely, positively there were mistakes made and if we could go back, I think we would have done some very big steps differently, but I feel like we accomplished what we needed to accomplish. (Respondent 007).

## Resiliency

I asked these interview questions, which produced specific data related to resiliency, using the identical Roller and Lavrakas (2015) enabling technique of separate 3x5 notecards with what Campbell and Bauer (2021) noted as four traits of resiliency along with a definition for the participant to respond to whether that trait fit or did not fit into their lived experience.

### *Forgiveness*

This study showed the resiliency trait of forgiveness fit among elders in 83% of responses, whereas pastors' responses showed a 32% fit, and support staff responded in the middle of the three roles at 52%. This unexpected result contradicts existing research by Macaskill (2005), who found in their study of samples of the general population that "the clergy score higher on total forgiveness, the forgiveness of self, others, and situations; rate forgiveness as being more important; [they] are more trusting; and are less cynical…" (p. 203).

When asked about forgiveness, there were distinctions made by respondents. These distinctions were clarifications regarding the forgiveness of Pastor A and the forgiveness of those decision makers in leadership after his departure. Either way, forgiveness was difficult. Respondent 006 put it this way:

> Forgiveness was hard for me. I don't think necessarily in reference specifically to Pastor A himself. I think it was more in reference to leadership not doing the best job of handling the rest of the staff and leadership when Pastor A was gone, so it wasn't directed toward him, but just below that level.

Then there were responses like the following stated by Respondent 001:

> There was a lot of forgiveness that had to be done without having conversations. I had to forgive Pastor A. I had to forgive him without actually having a conversation . . . what I realized, which was hard, was that I just had to forgive him and learn from what happened.

***Gratitude***

Gratitude was high among all respondents. Gratitude was the second highest, behind hope, of all nine characteristics and traits. This finding reflects existing literature that states gratitude is a significant predictor of happiness and personal well-being, according to Kardas (2019), who empirically found that "the variables of gratitude, optimism, hope, and life satisfaction all together accounted for about 51% of the variance of psychological well-being. Gratitude was determined as the most predictive variable for well-being" (p. 98). When asked about gratitude, responses noted relationships, including this one from Respondent 007:

> I am deeply grateful. Deeply grateful for the Lord's privilege, and I am deeply grateful for the people who were as committed to taking care of [case study church]. Yeah, these

> people, I think we all gave everything that we had to it. I would say that without each one of them, I think the result would have been very different if we hadn't had the same level of investment in it. There's a whole lot of gratitude to call on for everybody that was involved in this. I'm just really grateful for them all.

### *Hope*

Hope at 92% was the highest response score among all well-being characteristics and resiliency traits. This finding agrees with existing research which found hope as a primary trait and mediator contributing to resilience (Lopes & Cunha, 2008; Rand, 2018). "I believe that ultimately God led to my resilience of staying on staff because he gave me the joy of coming to work every day. He gave me the hope of coming to work every day" (Respondent 019). Another consistent response included the following: "If I wouldn't have had hope, it would have made it harder to come to work every day. I wouldn't have had that resilience to stay" (Respondent 023).

### *Optimism*

Optimism was high across the board, even though some respondents struggled to distinguish between hope and optimism. When clarified that hope was for the present and optimism for the future, a pastor commented that "optimism is what gave the perseverance to continue" (Respondent 003). Responent 009 put it this way:

> I did some research on optimism during that season because it was frustrating to me and what I felt like not a false optimism that this was not the "Stockholm syndrome," but "Stockdale Principal," that's what I really found to bring hope and optimism, right? Like it's not this sunshine and roses but there were times that we were trying to create . . . I have the ability because my hope is in the Lord to be like we really are fine.

According to research by Peters (2010), “Imagining a positive future can indeed increase expectancies for a positive future” (p. 205). One elder put optimism into perspective:

> I think it was in the midst of us getting our heads stuck in these big decisions, where in one respect, you just saw that the Lord was going to do what he wanted to do, regardless of who was here and so, if I would really think about it, which I did a lot, it made the problem much smaller because it was a human problem, not a God problem. And that hope leads to optimism. (Respondent 006)

**Relational Closeness**

The interview matrix’s last question was to gauge how perceived relational closeness to the departed leader might influence well-being or resiliency. Each participant was asked to self-report on a scale of 1 to 10, in which 1 = *no relationship*; and 10 = *deep friendship* with Pastor A. Most respondents placed themselves on the low end of that scale as the average score was 1 with a range between 1 and 9. Seven of the 25 respondents reported a score ≥ five or higher. Eighteen of the 25 respondents reported bewilderment with the relationship they thought they had and what they reported having. “We knew each other’s names. Want to say I think I knew more about him than he knew about me. So that’s one sided and that’s not really a relationship” (Respondent 003).

Respondent 001 summed up the concept of relational closeness:

> I thought it felt more like a business connection, rather than a pastor. I had great respect for him and all his teaching, but from a relational standpoint, I felt disconnected enough from Pastor A that he felt it was important to not have a really close relationship with me.

Several respondents expressed a desired relationship, but only a few sensed they had one. Those that rated themselves higher on the relational closeness scale made comments similar to Respondent 004, who scored the scale at 5: “My answer would be that I probably thought I was closer than I was. I mean, you have different levels of friendship in an organization. And that’s completely OK”; and Respondent 010, who scored the scale a 6:

> He had a way of making you feel like you were on the inside with him but you really weren’t. I don’t think we were really that close. I know he loved me. I still miss him. I genuinely loved doing ministry with him.

Other respondents with high-scale scores provided a numerical value without commentary.

Interestingly, whether scoring low or high on the scale, respondents resonated with a level of understanding reflected in what one pastor, Respondent 014, captured in thought:

> He was not one to put his toes in your sandbox unless he needed to. But I had a respect for Pastor A and I think he had a respect for me. I think Pastor A wasn’t close to a lot of people; he was such an introvert. He had a very select few people around him. I knew that if I really needed him, I could talk to him.

This finding supports the idea that Pastor A was well-loved and approachable but not well-known among the elders, pastors, and staff members.

Results of this study showed that participants who self-scored higher on the relational closeness scale also scored higher on positive responses to metaphorical communication. “All-hands-on-deck” motivated those who felt closer to Pastor A to dig in and keep going. As Feldmann (2014) noted, with positive change, that “the efficiency and productivity of the organization are increased, facilitating the achievement of the organization’s goals and mission. Individual and group morale are improved, and there is an overall sense of cohesion and well-

being" (pp. 672–673). Those in this study who scored lower on a positive response to metaphor communication reflected Feldman's claims that negative change is characterized by the following:

> [A] significant increase in stress, anxiety, and resistance. This, in turn, leads to decreased efficiency and productivity, which interferes with achieving the goals and mission of the organization. Another casualty of negative change is common sense—coping strategies or operational plans are adopted that are illogical, poorly conceived, or fail to anticipate unexpected consequences. Morale suffers as a result, and feelings of disillusionment and alienation permeate the group. (2014, p. 673)

**Leadership Issues**

Research on clergy and pastoral ministry leadership highlights destructive leadership connected to leader-centric patterns (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Examples of leader-centric patterns were noted as contributors to the lack of well-being at the case-study church.

> [Our leaders] needed to make some decisions and fill some gaps. [Pastor A's] direct reports and even people down, it affected all of that too and where they stand as leaders and how we organize them now and so that was another huge factor. It wasn't just that one specific role of leader, senior pastor, it was all the people that report to him and how that whole organization is structured and was built around that role. That role is gone and all those pieces kind of come apart and trying to figure out what to do with that, so it was pretty stressful, and I was pretty anxious for quite a while. (Respondent 006)

As noted, much of the existing literature focused on problems, such as burnout and compassion fatigue (Adams et al., 2017), issues of conflict (Fuller, 2014), hypocrisy (Effron et al., 2018), strategic failures (Allard-Poesi, 2015; Grandy, 2013), and power struggles noted in

ministry politics (Dirik & Eryılmaz, 2018). Responses from the current study supported these findings and contributed to the impact on the well-being and resiliency of ministry leaders.

> I think structure is important to some degree; now it can be rigid and that can create hierarchy and that can create abuses of power and other things, but there are so many times in this period where I remember thinking, gosh it would be nice for everybody to just stop for a minute and say, "hey, what do we need this to be right now?" And give us one person in charge or two people in charge and clear job descriptions and who's over what because it seems like somebody's over here doing this and I hear somebody's over there doing that and those two things don't line up. (Respondent 017)

The current findings support much of the existing literature related to clergy leadership focused on problematic symptoms determined by assessing, defining, and eradicating problematic issues, such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and organizational dissent (Garner, 2016). These characteristics were noted by Respondent 017:

> We were an organization that was so structured around the personality, the absence of a personality then really gives you no direction and nobody knows how to put the pieces back together. You know, Humpty Dumpty fell off the wall . . . I know I was angry at the fact that if you're at that level of authority in the organization, you should have the responsibility of making sure that if you have to leave for whatever reason, the people underneath you are cared for well.

Research shows that the most common disruption among church staff occurs when no succession plan exists (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013; Pomerleau et al., 2020). One perplexed respondent asked the following:

> We only see plan A of Pastor A coming back. Do you have contingency plans and what does that look like for us? I'm not hearing enough. So, I'm trying to ask for information, and I feel like the door was shut on that. Forgiveness for the group of decision makers was harder for me to come by. (Respondent 003)

Research by Olds (2017) suggested that "regardless of a church's polity, leadership is distributed among clergy and laypersons, in formal structures and informal networks, between those who are in official positions and those who are not. Leadership for change is a shared endeavor" (p. 43). However, this shared endeavor was not the lived experience of most respondents. Respondent 020 noted that

> from an organizational perspective, I think that they were doing the best they could to manage, but we quickly moved into a shared leadership model. The way they elected to do it was poorly done and not very well thought out. So it was a team that was put together and there was really not the authority given to that team to actually lead. It was really disjointed.

**Implications**

Implications of this study are reflected in the research questions and the results, which bring to the forefront the ministry leadership's well-being and resiliency. The most significant differences in well-being appeared between relationships, meaning, and achievement. Disillusionment ensued, as seen in the results concerning detached meaning. The unplanned leadership transition most negatively affected the well-being of pastors and those with longer tenure at the case study church. Why were pastors most negatively affected? I noticed more pastors mentioned concern over their employment as a stress point concerning their vocational, spiritual calling. This factor may have contributed to pastors' feeling an added heaviness during

this season. This event most negatively impacted the resiliency of pastors and implies pastors may be more vulnerable since they serve at the whim of the lead pastor, and when that person leaves, there is a sense of their job at risk. Support staff identified similar pains during the transition but bounced back relatively quickly, implying their ability to focus on tasks, remain engaged, and pursue healthy achievement amid arduous circumstances. Support staff remained focused on achievement and did not report concern over their position to the extent of pastors' concerns. Although questioning their wherewithal to remain engaged voluntarily, elders reported resiliency scores of 92% and a well-being score of 70%. The implication of these results speaks to ministry leaders' character and spiritual maturity to courageously remain involved. This dynamic was the distinguishing characteristic of all groups.

The second research question emphasized resiliency and produced overwhelming results linked to a deficiency across the board. Why do people with the strongest relationships have the least forgiveness? Those are people with more time in their roles and positions. As noted in the study results on tenure and shared experiences, these individuals felt a more significant loss and sense of betrayal with the departure of Pastor A. It seems that assumed relational equity produced more profound hurt and offense that prolonged a willingness or created a barrier to forgive. It seems individual focus during a season of transition was myopic to immediate tasks and not on fostering healthy expectations or intentionally nurturing relationships.

**Limitations**

Case study generalizability in qualitative study is limited but not irrelevant. For churches and parachurch organizations that have a similar context with a high-caliber leader, long-tenured, large staff, sudden departure, lack of clarity moving forward, and disunity, this research speaks to their situation. For the majority, this study was limited to the case study church and cannot

transfer findings to a broader context. Another limiting factor of this study was that it did not address cultural factors, such as race relations heightened during the transition; nor did this study address the COVID pandemic, which undoubtedly affected individual well-being to certain degrees. These factors are worth further attention but were outside the scope of the current study as possible factors which may have affected the interpretation of the results away from the aim of this study specific to the lived experiences of an unplanned leadership transition.

A potential limitation specific to this study was my role and relationship to the case study church. I worked as a pastor on the church staff for over 17 years and knew each of the 25 participants of this study. It is my opinion that this relational equity and trust enhanced the honesty and vulnerability brought to the responses. Although no longer in leadership or in a position of authority at the church, I remain involved as a member of the church body.

**Recommendations**

Based on the implications, these practice recommendations bridge the research to practice by recommending how the research can inform practice. The narratives of each lived experience among respondents spoke to relational and process issues. Because of this, I recommend an intentional program of care be given to all those who endured this season of transition, not only those sampled for this study but to all ministry leaders who remained on staff during the transition. It is recommended that time, space, place, and people be made available to engage in dialogue to process and talk through issues, concerns, assumptions, and cares.

One observation made was the hesitation of many participants to revisit the concept of forgiveness. “Do I really need to answer this?” Such hesitation points to the need for personalized, guided assistance in personal peacemaking, aligning with a biblical understanding of the difference between forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. Based on this study’s

findings, practical applications are recommended to focus on the care of ministry leaders needing to process the hurt from the season of transition. Although pastors scored the least likely to forgive among all three roles, all roles identified forgiveness as a weakness to resiliency during the transition.

This study demonstrated that leadership issues were and still are in need of attention. These issues can be addressed with appropriate policies and procedures to ensure a healthier leadership culture. It is recommended that the church leadership update the current bylaws to ensure a process to clarify elder roles to include accountability and a robust decision-making tree, specifically in times of leadership crisis, for a flow of thriving leadership. I suggest the development of a program for succession that utilizes existing research supporting on-the-job training for ministry leaders (Bird, 2014; Cavanaugh, 2017; Pugh, 2016). I also suggest an evaluation of the current communication process and identification of improvements to ensure every ministry leader hears, understands, and is motivated to respond accordingly. This communication can be done effectively using feedback loops for consistent communication and providing dialogue toward enriching employee well-being. Additionally, I recommended that relationships be intentionally nurtured through team- and relationship-building among ministry staff.

Further research in well-being and resiliency would include a broader representation of church denominations beyond that of the nondenominational case study church. Research on well-being characteristics and resiliency traits can inform the development of programs and curricula specific to ministry leadership development. Directly from the implications of this study, research can be extended to further develop an understanding of causation through a

quantitative study of well-being and resiliency. I also encourage further study in applying well-being and resiliency specifically to Christian ministry leaders.

**Summary and Conclusions**

This qualitative, phenomenological, single case study added to the understanding of how characteristics of the WBT (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and traits of resiliency (Campbell & Bauer, 2021) influenced ministry leaders that remained on church staff after an unplanned pastoral leadership transition. The current study supported existing research that identified the unplanned change in pastoral leadership as disturbing the well-being of other ministry leaders (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013; Pomerleau et al., 2020).

I learned that those with higher perceived relational closeness to the departed leader had more difficulty forgiving. Therefore, those with the closest perception of a relationship with the leader need the most care and attention for intentional processing. Our research questions provided nine themes specific to well-being and resiliency, and interview questions produced robust results supporting existing literature with only a few unexpected results. This study produced an additional theme of Leadership Issues in which respondents elaborated on specific areas of concern.

Cavanaugh (2017) stated, “Leadership transitions are inevitable and unplanned. When leaders change, there is always a ‘disturbance in the force’ that, at the very least, is displayed in terms of style and at worst in terms of chaos” (p. 22). The case study church has appeared to thrive as it moves forward, taking lessons from a two-year disturbance in the force of an unplanned leadership transition. This observation may be largely due to the legacy left by the departed senior leader—valuing others, remaining mission-hearted, committed to the cause of Christ, and solidified in their identity in Christ. It is my opinion that this represents a significant

preexisting condition within the sample population. Based on my prior work inside the sample population and observations during the interview process, the underlying spiritual maturity, relational equities, emotional connection, and emotional health of study participants may have contributed to higher overall levels of well-being and resiliency in the years following this unplanned and confusing leadership transition.

There is a narrative of redemption in this case study reflecting resiliency traits. The individual lived experiences of participants, without exception, culminated in the same place of recognizing that the Lord God is in control. The sovereignty of God at work amid pain, grief, hell, and frustration birthed the fruit of deepened friendships, refocused purpose, and enduring hope. This narrative is the larger story of the church, one of hope amid struggle fueled by the gospel of Christ.

> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

As of this writing, a firm hope is held that what some would characterize as a tragedy becomes redemptive. May future leaders choose to till the soil of well-being and resiliency before they depart, as exampled in the life of the Apostle Paul, so that those left behind can lean on the legacy that remains and the hope they have in Christ. (Acts 20:17–38).

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## Appendix A: Strategic Grid of Interview Questions

Interview questions are specifically linked to the following:

***RQ1:*** How does an unplanned leadership transition affect habits of well-being (e.g., Positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement)?

***RQ2*:** How are habits of well-being related to characteristics of resiliency (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, hope, and optimism)?

| Type of Question | |
|---|---|
| 1. Introductory | How long have you been in vocational ministry? |
| 2. Introductory | How long have you been ministering here at (case study church)? |
| 2b. Self-Reporting | How would you define your working relationship to (Pastor A) in terms of interaction? “daily” “regularly” “sporadically” or “rarely” |
| 3. Transition | What **word** or **words** would you use to describe the events between (Pastor A) leaving and (Pastor B) arriving? |
| 4a. Narrative | Thinking back to that season, how was the news of (Pastor A) leaving delivered, and how would you describe your initial reaction to hearing the news? |
| 4b. Narrative | In the months that followed, what thoughts and feelings were you experiencing? |

| | |
|---|---|
| 4c. Follow-up | How did you hear, and what did you experience when the staff was called to be “all-hands-on-deck”? |
| 5. PERMA Prompt Cards | These are some of the concepts of well-being people say are either present or not during a leadership transition. I’m curious how these fit into your experience. Pick a card, one at a time, and tell me how that concept fit or didn’t fit into your experience of the transition. |
| 6. Resiliency Prompt Cards | These concepts are what some believe contribute to resiliency through change and difficulty. I’m curious how these fit into your experience. Pick a card, one at a time, and tell me how that concept fit or didn’t fit into your experience of the transition. |
| 7a. Narrative | Is there anything else you want to share about what contributed to your remaining on staff during a season of unplanned leadership transition? |
| 7b. Self-Reporting | On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is “no relational connection” and 10 represents “deep friendship,” how close were you to (Pastor A)? |

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol Matrix

Script prior to the interview:

I'd like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview portion of my study. As I mentioned, my study seeks to understand habits of well-being among ministry leaders here at the church from the time of one Senior Pastor's leaving to the time a new Senior Pastor was hired. The aim of my research is not to determine fault or blame, but to document habits of well-being as possible contributing factors to your resilience in staying on staff through the events that took place. Our interview today will last approximately 90 minutes, during which I will ask you about how the leadership transition of a Senior Pastor that took place between April 14, 2019 and March 22, 2021, affected you personally.

(review consent form)

Before this interview, you completed a consent and release form indicating that I have your permission (or not) to audio record our conversation. As a reminder, your name and comments will not be revealed. I will take participant comments, compare them to other participants, and identify common themes as a collective group.

Are you still ok with me recording (or not) our conversation today? Yes___ or No___

If yes: Thank you. Please let me know if, at any point, you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record.

If no: Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? (Discuss questions)

If any questions arise in this interview, feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

## Appendix C: Consent and Release Form

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Exploring Habits of Well-Being Rooted in Resiliency Among Ministry Leaders Having Experienced a Leadership Transition of Senior Pastor in the Church: A Case Study

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Eric D Willis, MAMFC, MACE.

xxxxxxxxx@acu.edu.

You may be able to take part in a research study. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you as a potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have about the study. You can ask about research activities and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with others, such as your family doctor, therapist, or a family member. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or stop your participation at any time and for any reason.

**PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION**: This study will provide information about the well-being and resiliency of ministry leaders having experienced a leadership transition in the church. If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked for a face-to-face interview, expected to take one to 1.5 hours. During this interview, you will be asked to describe your lived experience of a leadership transition from April 2019 to March 2021.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS**: Limited risks result from taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur:

• Rarely a participant may experience a breach of confidentiality, although efforts will be taken to minimize this potential.

• It is highly probable that a participant may experience more emotional sensitivity while sharing lived experiences, which may not be a negative consequence.

One potential benefit to participating in this study may include more self-awareness. However, I cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study.

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES**: No known alternative procedures may be advantageous to the participant.

**PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**: Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside the study team, such as ACU Institutional Review Board members. Otherwise, your confidentiality will be protected by maintaining electronic data on password-protected drives accessed through password-protected devices. At a suitable time after the study's conclusion, the data will be appropriately deleted. Additionally, your confidentiality will be protected by the following:

• Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents

• Keeping physical notes, SD cards, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying

participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher. Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, abuse and suicide risk.

**COLLECTION OF IDENTIFIABLE PRIVATE INFORMATION**:

After identifying information is removed, your data may be used for future research, including by other researchers without contacting you again.

**CONTACTS**: If you have questions about the research study, the lead researcher is Eric Willis, a doctoral student at Abilene Christian University, and may be contacted at [redacted]. If you cannot reach the lead researcher or wish to speak to someone other than the lead researcher, you may contact [redacted]. If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact [redacted].

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**: Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study which relies on the audio recording of individual lived experiences. My consent is noted below. Sign only after you have read all the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

___I DO give consent to audio recording our interview.

___I DO NOT give consent to audio recording our interview.

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Printed Name of Participant | Signature of Participant | Date |

## Appendix D: Email to Participant Pool

(email sent to individuals identified as meeting study requirements)

"Name of Individual elder or staff member", I am completing a qualitative research study in the completion of my dissertation at Abilene Christian University. I hope to learn more about the habits of well-being and resiliency among ministry leaders who experience a senior pastor leadership transition. The leadership of (Case study church) has graciously allowed the church to be a case study; therefore, you are eligible for this study if you are currently an elder or staff member who was in their role between April 2019 and March 2021. The leadership is not requiring your participation and will not be given access to your individual responses. Participation in this study is voluntary and would have minimal risk to you. Participants remain anonymous, and I will maintain appropriate confidentiality. Personally identifiable information will be removed as I collect data from your story. The attached consent form has additional information.

Each participant is requested to make themselves available for a face-to-face interview lasting up to 90 minutes. I have a list of questions that will be asked of each respondent to help guide your opportunity to share your lived experience. I am available to answer any questions and look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your consideration in assisting me with this research. If you will participate, please respond to this email and print the attached consent form to be signed and handed to me.

Eric Willis

EdD – Organizational Leadership Candidate

Abilene Christian University

# Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter

**Date:** January 27, 2023

**PI:** Eric Willis

**Department:** ONL-Online Student, 17250-EdD Online

**Re:** Initial - IRB-2023-7

*Exploring Habits of Well-Being Rooted in Resiliency Among Ministry Leaders Having Experienced a Leadership Transition of Senior Pastor in the Church: A Case Study*

The Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for Exploring Habits of Well-Being Rooted in Resiliency Among Ministry Leaders Having Experienced a Leadership Transition of Senior Pastor in the Church: A Case Study. The approval is effective starting January 27, 2023.

**Admin Check-in Date:** January 27, 2024
**Expiration Date:** --
**Decision:** Approved

**Category:** 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Research Notes:**

**Additional Approvals/Instructions:**

Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Form within 30 days of study completion.
If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Modification Form.
If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Incident Report Form. All approval letters and study documents are located within the Study Details in Cayuse IRB.

The following are all responsibilities of the Primary Investigator (PI). Violation of these responsibilities