

Resilience in a Liminal Time

A Festschrift Honoring
Bishop Janice Riggle Huie's
Work, Leadership,
and Creative Thinking

Bishop Janice Riggle Huie
Tom Locke
Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle

Resilience in a Liminal Time

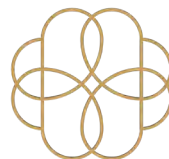
A Festschrift Honoring Bishop Janice Riggle Huie's
Work, Leadership, and Creative Thinking

Janice Riggle Huie, Tom Locke, and Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle ————— January 2026

Presented by



**WESLEYAN
IMPACT
PARTNERS**
IGNITING IMAGINATION



**TEXAS
METHODIST
FOUNDATION**
STEWARDED POTENTIAL

Introduction

Dear Friends,

In recent years, many religious leaders have found themselves navigating profound uncertainty. What once felt stable or familiar no longer carries the same clarity it once did.

Several years ago, through my work with Texas Methodist Foundation and in conversation with leaders across the church, I began exploring the theme of resilience — the capacity to remain grounded in purpose and integrity amid changing circumstances. Those reflections became especially important during the disruptions of the pandemic, denominational conflict, and the continuing transformation of religious life in our culture.

Over the past year, Tom Locke, Gil Rendle, and I returned to those earlier reflections with a growing awareness that the questions surrounding resilience had become even more urgent, to ask: **What does resilience mean in a liminal time — a threshold moment when old assumptions are giving way and the future is still emerging?**

This monograph grows out of those conversations. Gil has given thoughtful shape and language to many of the ideas we explored together. I am deeply grateful for his wisdom, insight, and faithful partnership in this work.

What emerges in these pages is not a formula for certainty or institutional recovery. **Rather, it is an invitation to deeper discernment — a call to remain steady in purpose while becoming more flexible, courageous, and attentive in strategy and practice.**

I believe this reflection is especially relevant for leaders serving in this season of transition and disruption. My hope is that it will encourage thoughtful conversation, faithful imagination, and renewed clarity about who we are called to be in the midst of change.

May these reflections strengthen your leadership and deepen your hope for the work ahead.

Bishop Janice Riggle Huie

Resilience in a Liminal Time

Ecologists define resilience as the capacity of a system or enterprise to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances. For example, resilience is the capacity of a forest to return and cover the slopes of Mount St. Helens in only a few decades following the massive volcanic eruption of 1980, which smothered the slopes with deadly gases and ash. Or resilience is the capacity of deer to continue to thrive when their forested home is transformed into the open green spaces of housing developments. The question facing many religious leaders is whether Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations are resilient. Do they have the capacity to maintain their core purpose and integrity during a time of social dislocation when institutions are no longer trusted, and when generational/cultural changes encourage individuals to be “spiritual but not religious” (SBNRs), i.e., seeking meaning for their lives through other than organized religion?

Bishop Janice Riggle Huie brought the concept of resilience into play with her work with Texas Methodist Foundation (TMF). Writing two monographs on resilience between 2018 and 2020¹, she helped shape conversations and decisions among religious leaders. This was during a time of continued denominational decline that was further exacerbated by the changed social patterns of a pandemic, followed within United Methodism by a schism that in some parts of the United States halved the number of congregations and the resources available to the denomination. Janice helped leaders keep their focus on purpose and integrity when so many changes were swirling about beyond their control.

Now, even deeper changes are being experienced. Along with denominational and congregational stress, the landscape now contains a stronger presence of SBNRs, a political turmoil that is clearly dividing the nation, the resurgence of White Supremacy, and a highly organized Christian Nationalism that confuses many about what it means to be Christian. In such a time, leaders have returned to Janice’s writings

¹ Janice Riggle Huie, “Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land: A Call for Resilience in Uncertain Times,” (Austin, Texas Methodist Foundation, 2018); “Reservoirs of Resilience in Uncertain Times: Reflections on Hope, Courage and Purpose,” (Austin, Texas Methodist Foundation. 2020).

on resilience to find help. But the question that formed among some was, “Is there more?” Is there more that can be said about resilience to help in the challenge that leaders of organized religion now face?

The Conversations

In November and December of 2025, Tom Locke and Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle sat with Janice Riggle Huie for conversations about resilience. What had she and others learned in the years since her earlier monographs? Tom Locke is the retired president of TMF, and Gil Rendle, also retired from a relationship with TMF, continues a limited retirement practice of consulting and writing. The new question that framed the conversations was – “What is resilience in a liminal time?” A liminal time is that space between what we once knew with some certainty about the past, and the confusion of a future not fully formed.

The Fresh Argument for Resilience in a Liminal Time

The conversation began with some affirmations:

- The definition of resilience as framed by the ecological sciences still holds: “the capacity of a system or enterprise to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changing circumstances.”
- Also, that resilience is the capacity to do *more than survive*. This was the earlier feedback to the work on resilience from African American colleagues for whom the language of resilience provided a way for others to disregard them, as in, “Oh don’t worry about the African American community. They are resilient.” The American history of Black Americans is that the deep resilience that enabled them to survive was then used against them when equality and inclusion continued to be denied them.
- That, more than survival, resilience is the capacity to *thrive, even to reinvent*. As we will see, resilience practiced as “anti-fragility” can find benefits in times of culture shock and foster actual improvements because of the volatility, randomness, disorder, and stress that is found in liminal times.

It was here that the new conversation with Janice, Tom, and Gil picked up the notions of *a threshold* and *flipping* that occurs in systems as they move further into change.² Janice's earlier work pointed out that thriving in the new environment doesn't happen until the old environment falls apart. A threshold is the point at which the environment has changed so substantially that it transitions into an entirely different regime. The closer one is to a threshold, the less energy it takes for a system to "flip," i.e., to emerge into a new form more appropriate to the changed environment.³

A First Step Is Understanding Liminality

The word "liminal" is from late 19th-century use based on the Latin *limen* or *limin*, meaning to occupy a position on the boundary or a threshold. It carries the notion of a moment in which one is awaiting a great change.

One waits not just for the next day, but for a new day – the first of a time when things will be different. In a liminal time, resilience seeks not only to maintain purpose and integrity in dramatically changed circumstances. It also must speak to maintaining purpose and integrity at a boundary in which the near future will be so different that old ways will no longer effectively work. It is a time of thresholds and flipping. Of being so close to change that it requires very little more energy to flip into new forms because the change is almost already present.

[Liminality] carries the notion of a moment in which one is awaiting a great change.

It is critical to note that a liminal time is one in which the environment is already highly charged. The energy and anxiety seem to fairly crackle around a leader's head over what no longer works and the inability to see with any confidence into the future. A liminal time may be propitious, but it is certainly not comfortable.

Before it will be helpful to dig deeper into resilience, it is first important to understand the critical nature of such a liminal time – something addressed by both

² Janice Riggie Huie, "Reservoirs of Resilience," 2020. p. 6.

³ Janice used the work of Brian Walker and David Salt (*Resilience Practices*, Island Press, 2012) to frame these ideas in her writing.

our sciences and our faith. For curiously, the disciplines of both quantum physics and theology have their own languages for a liminal time – the point at which deep change is marked by thresholds and flipping. The language of quantum physics is the language of mathematics; the language of theology is narrative. In the end, both languages say much the same thing. Together, they help us see more.

First to the discipline of science and the world it describes through nonlinear mathematics: as early as the 1960s, Nobel Award-winning physicist Ilya Prigogine developed the theory of dissipative structures in which structures, when introduced to increased energy, go through a stage of overall instability (a threshold) and transform themselves (flip) into new emergent structures of increased complexity.⁴ Working at the subatomic level, Prigogine showed that when structures break down, the energy is not simply wasted (the assumption of classical thermodynamics) but, in fact, is used by the structure to jump to a radical new ordering of the system. With Prigogine's work and the continued development of nonlinear mathematics, this transformation became known within the sciences as *emergent systems theory*. At the threshold of change, there comes a point of instability so great that structures flip – and a new emergent structure is formed. This is not just the next day; it actually is a new day.

A number of years later, through advanced developments of experimentation and increasingly sophisticated mathematics (and the advance of computers able to work with nonlinear data), the physicist Per Bak introduced the science of *self-organized criticality*. It is in Bak's work, importantly, that a non-mathematical, metaphorical description makes the liminal time of radical change much easier to understand. Bak does this with the metaphor of a sand pile:

Consider a flat table, onto which sand is added slowly, one grain at a time... The flat state represents the general equilibrium state; this state has the lowest energy, since obviously we would have to add energy to rearrange the sand to form heaps of any shape.... As we continue to add more sand, the pile becomes steeper, and small sand slides or avalanches

4 Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*, Cambridge University Press, 2014. p. 159.

occur. The grain may land on top of other grains and topple to a lower level. This may, in turn, cause other grains to topple. The addition of a single grain of sand can cause a local disturbance, but nothing dramatic happens to the pile. In particular, events in one part of the pile do not affect sand grains in more distant parts of the pile. There is no global communication within the pile at this stage, just many individual grains of sand.

As the slope increases, a single grain of sand is more likely to cause other grains to topple. Eventually, the slope reaches a certain value and cannot increase any further, because the amount of sand added is balanced on average by the amount of sand leaving the pile by falling off the edges. This is called a stationary state, since the average amount of sand and the average slope are constant in time. It is clear that to have this average balance between the sand added to the pile, say, in the center, and the sand leaving along the edges, there must be communication throughout the entire system. There will occasionally be avalanches that span the whole pile. This is the self-organized critical state. The addition of grains of sand has transformed the system from a state in which the individual grains followed their own local dynamics to a critical state where the emergent dynamics are global.⁵

Even here in the simple example of a sand pile, the layperson must read carefully. For the essence of the self-organizing critical state is not just more sand (change) being added, but that the final addition of sand that causes the tipping point is communicated throughout the whole system (the sand pile). It is more than local change. The liminal time is not just a moment of great change but is marked by change that is global – it is expressed and experienced throughout the whole of the system.

Going back to our religious systems at the beginning of the 21st century, it isn't enough that more and more people are becoming SBNRs. That, by itself, is a significant change in American denominationalism. But the fact that people are changing their relationship to religious institutions all across the globe and across multiple

5 Per Bak, *How Nature Works: The Science of Self-Organized Criticality*, Copernicus Press, 1996. p. 50-51.

generational cohorts gives us the hint that this is a liminal moment – a time in which the whole religious system is poised for transformation. It isn't enough that the United States is involved in deeply contested political divisions. But the strain of radical conservatism challenging old notions of democracy that were formed by the liberalism of the Enlightenment is actually a global experience, with the tension between democracy and tyranny being fought on multiple continents. Again, politically, there is evidence, not just of deep change, but of a liminal time – we are politically poised for a moment of self-organized criticality.

At first glance, the language of mathematics describing dissipative structures and self-organized criticality seems a far distance from one's daily experience. But what can be said about subatomic particles and sandpiles can equally be said of religious structures and even of cultures. Each of these is an interconnected and interrelated system. As Capra and Luisi note, "When we look at the world today,

**All our systems are
under a shared stress
in a liminal time.**

what is most evident is the fact that the major problems of our time – energy, the environment, climate change, food security, financial security – cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems...."⁶ It can be argued, as Capra and Luisi do, that all our systems are under a shared stress in a liminal time.

We, in American religious systems, are not alone. And until leaders of religious systems see themselves as only part of a much more global and comprehensive liminal moment, insufficient solutions or "next steps" are likely to be attempted at managerial levels as if the tensions were localized problems, possible of solution. With such an insufficient response, problems remain unsolved, and leaders miss, by far, the import and opportunity of the moment.

If that be the case, then we in religious systems are further helped when we turn to our own language to understand this moment. And our language is narrative storytelling – a language much easier for us to understand. These are the stories of great depth, going beyond any notions of controllable change. It is the narrative of Israel's 400 years of slavery, building to the threshold point that is the story of Moses when he stood against Pharaoh through the ten plagues along the Nile and risked leading his people through the parting of the Red Sea into the desert. Consider the liminality of a people wandering in an inhospitable desert for forty years – a time

6 Capra and Luisi, p. 362.

when the life they knew fell apart, but in which they were still searching for the new self-ordering form of a nation that they would become in the Promised Land. Imagine clearly the anxiety, uncertainty, and fear, but also the propitiousness of the moment when a desert slave people “flipped” and became a nation.

This narrative language of faith is also offered by Walter Brueggemann in his work with the Psalms. He describes the Psalms as songs of “orientation – disorientation – new orientation.”⁷ He argues that the Psalms can be understood as expressing three movements in Israel’s history. All together they are the “songs of guaranteed creation” (ex. 1, 8, 15, 19, 24, 33, 104, 145), the “songs of disarray” (ex. personal disarray – 13, 35, 86, and communal disarray – 74, 79, 137), and the “songs of surprising new life” (ex. personal – 30, 34, 40, 138, and communal – 65, 66, 124, 129). Taken together, the Psalms give us the hymnody of a people who remembered their strong beginnings, went through the liminal time of anxious disarray, and tenaciously clung to their purpose and identity with deep resilience to emerge in a new ordering of life as a separate and identifiable nation.

This is the narrative of our understanding of Jesus Christ in the deeply theological statement of Philippians 2 in which the story of Jesus takes us through the same movements: “Though he was in the form of God” (orientation), “he emptied himself” (disorientation), so that “therefore, God has highly exalted him” (new orientation).

This is the Gospel narrative of the life of Jesus in which the infant Jesus was born into a liminal time in which Jews lived under the rule of Rome, the old order of life collapsed in the crucifixion, and Jesus’ followers found a newly reordered day in the resurrection.

This is the narrative that Christians today share with one another in the ritual of baptism, in which submission to the water is evidence of the loss of control of our lives (disorientation) as a necessary precondition to new life that can be found in Christ (new orientation).

7 Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2002.)

Despite the anxiety of the present day, in which our religious institutions experience exceptional stress and challenges, and our political lives strain under the contest of culture wars, both our science and our faith help us to understand that we are at a critical, liminal moment that requires a tenacious resilience to get through. We stand at a threshold, poised to flip. Our narratives tell us that we have been here before. Our science tells us that the order of creation is to go through these times cyclically. Having been here before, we will be here again.

It is important to understand that this is far from being an unholy moment. Yes, the people of the church feel a sense of great loss. Many congregations are struggling with the level of change that they face. Many leaders at both the congregational and denominational levels are personally and spiritually exhausted from working harder and longer with fewer and weaker results. It is no wonder that so many focus on grief and lament – which is very much appropriate, if not necessary, to a time of loss. Consider, as noted above, the Psalms of disorientation. But there is great reason that the Gospel text of the story of Jesus repeats the exhortation to not be afraid. There is holy purpose and there is spiritual grounding to be found at a threshold as well. Father Richard Rohr brings both the wisdom of the sciences and the wisdom of the faith together when he says:

Transformation more often happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart. The pain of something old falling apart – disruption and chaos – invites the soul to a deeper level. It invites and sometimes forces the soul to a new place because the old place is not working.⁸

Resilience In a Liminal Time: Living and Leading at a Threshold

Resilience begins by looking at the current reality with as much clarity as possible. In the present case, it begins by taking to heart what the dissipative

⁸ Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation, “When Things Fall Apart,” December 29, 2017.

structures and the self-organized criticality of science tell us, along with the experience of transformation that we know through our own faith narratives, i.e., that:

1. The moments of greatest change are high-energy times in which insecurity, anxiety, and pressure are deeply felt as the threshold approaches.
2. The timing of (1) when a system will flip, and (2) what the new order of things will be like, is unknown. Nonetheless, the necessary waiting produces a liminal boundary in which leaders must continue to lead without fully knowing where they are going.⁹
3. It is all fully out of our control.

It is here, at the point of being able to see our current reality as one poised for changes that go well beyond our control, that we can return to the notion of resilience in a new and more robust way. And for this, we will be guided by the constructs of fragility and antifragility.

Remember that our conversation-of-three was building on Janice Riggle Huie's earlier work on resilience. In her 2018 monograph "Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land," she previewed the reality that we now face:

Crossing a threshold occurs when there is no or inadequate adaptation to cyclical change, or when a disturbance changes the purpose of the system, or when a disturbance alters the way a system functions so dramatically that it is no longer recognizable in its present form. The system "flips" and can no longer serve its core purpose with integrity.¹⁰

But note also that in her earlier work, Janice also affirmed that "resilient systems can encounter unforeseen threats, adapt, maintain their core purpose and

9 Nassim Taleb refers to this as "decision making opacity, a map and a protocol on how we should live in a world we don't understand." Leading without knowing where one is going is a notion supported by the narratives of faith stories, such as the Exodus in the wilderness. Such leadership is both possible and faithful.

10 Huie, "Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land," p. 22.

put themselves back together again.” And she briefly introduced the work of Nassim Taleb and his concept of the “anti-fragile.” The time between Janice’s earlier work and the present moment has convinced the three of us in our conversations that the difference between that which is “fragile” and that which is “antifragile” is critical to understanding a resilience that can thrive in the liminal time of waiting for a system to flip.

The full title of Taleb’s book outlining his work is *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*.¹¹ More than being able to surf the shock waves of great disorder in an attempt to remain the same, Taleb introduced the notion of systems *improving*, that is, changing in positive ways, because of the shocks encountered in a threshold change.

Begin first with the idea of fragility. A guiding assumption about leadership is that issues/problems/conditions that make an organization vulnerable or fragile are to be managed/solved / controlled. If evidence is needed for this instinct of leadership to seek to control and fix things, there may be no better example than denominational books of polity, such as the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. (For example, within the *Book of Discipline*, approximately 70 pages are given to history and doctrine – i.e., *who* and *why* the church is - with over 750 pages given to organization, structure, rules, regulations, and judicial administration – i.e., *how* the church is to be routinized.) Granted that such documents of polity are the product of many years of additions and changes made by legislative bodies. It is the long history of leaders seeking to control and to fix. But the overall nature of polity is that of a composite of rules, regulations, practices, and corrections all intended to produce an orderly and routinized system that is easy to manage and control from central offices “at the top.” At an earlier time, such organized, routinized systems thrived under central control. It has been said that the British system of global colonialism, beginning in the 16th century, was possible because of an educational system that taught both accounting and penmanship. With everyone doing accounting the same way and then writing reports that could be clearly read by everyone else, the British were able to send their representatives across the globe to build corporations and establish forms of governance that each reflected and followed the form of the others. It was a widespread system of replicated parts that were possible to control centrally from home offices in Britain. The long period of British colonization was a time requiring courage and sacrifice from some,

11 Nassim Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*, (New York: Random House, 2012).

but a time essentially understood and managed by the leaders who worked effectively to control it.

Such orderliness in a replicated system under central control was once a strategy that produced strength and robustness in church systems as well. In denominational polities, singular definitions of what a congregation is, along with prescribed structures for their form and governance, including regular required reporting on measures of what is seen as institutionally important, using ordained leaders all trained similarly in denominationally approved seminaries, all produced a routinized system that functioned well under central denominational control. In post-World War II America, in the 1940s to the 1960s, such an aligned system under central control produced exponential growth within Mainline Protestantism in response to the post-war culture. Methodism (a people noted for their methodical ways) was a prime example of the strength of a routinized system under central control.

Yet in every strength there is, contained within itself, its own demise. This is a fundamental concept of Yin and Yang in Chinese philosophy. Any practice overused beyond its appropriate limits eventually must give way to its opposite or perish. A strength overused becomes a fragility.

In Taleb's work, the difference between fragile and antifragile can be found in a comparison between the banking system and the system of air travel. One is highly routinized with tight central control (banking), and one, while still heavily regulated by standards of practice, operates independently as separate events (air travel). Taleb's point is that the more that an interrelated and

The more that an interrelated and interdependent system is centrally regulated and controlled, the more rigid it becomes.

interdependent system is centrally regulated and controlled, the more rigid it becomes. Such rigidity produces fragility in times of volatility. Regulated and centrally controlled systems thrive in steady, predictable times, as noted above. But because of the tight control that makes them rigid, they are vulnerable in environments of pronounced change. In banking systems – indeed in the global economic system – all banks and economic institutions are both highly

connected and highly regulated. The banking system is rigid and centrally controlled. Each bank depends upon every other bank as part of the same interconnected system. It makes sense then, that in times of volatility, randomness, stress, and disorder, the

result is a fragility in which the failure of one bank increases the potential failure of all other banks. The whole is impacted by the experience of the part. The result is felt throughout the whole interrelated system. This is the “global” nature of a system poised for self-organized criticality. The crisis is experienced throughout the whole of the system.

Such is not the case with an airplane flight, which takes place within a highly detailed system of carefully developed practices and protocols, but is actually an individual event unconnected to the other airplane flights around it. Each airplane flight is separate and unique, related to but not connected to other flights. If one plane crashes, it does not necessarily threaten other plane flights. In fact, this is a system that benefits from shocks, randomness, disorder, and accidents. If one plane crashes, it is investigated (as a separate event) at such a high level and in such detail that any information gleaned from the accident is used to make air travel safer and more robust for all other flights. It is antifragile as described by Taleb:

Every plane crash brings us closer to safety, improves the system, and makes the next flight safer – those who perish contribute to the overall safety of others. Swiss flight 111, TWA flight 800, and Air France flight 447 allowed the improvement of the system. These systems learn because they are antifragile and set up to exploit small errors; the same cannot be said of economic crashes, since the economic system is not antifragile the way it is presently built. Why? There are hundreds of thousands of plane flights every year, and the crash in one plane does not involve others, so errors remain confined and highly epistemic- whereas globalized economic systems operate as one: errors spread and compound.

Again, crucially, we are talking of partial, not general, mistakes, small, not severe and terminal ones. This creates a separation between good and bad systems. Good systems such as airlines are set up to have small errors, independent from each other or, in effect, negatively correlated to each other, since mistakes lower the odds of future mistakes.¹²

¹² Taleb, p.72

At the heart of anti-fragility (a resilience that not only weathers thresholds and flipping, but actually gets stronger with shocks, randomness, and disorder) is the recognition that *volatility is information*.¹³ Systems that allow their component units freedom from routinization and controlled interconnectedness are built in such a way that they actually benefit, become stronger, as their parts experience local volatility with the freedom to learn and adapt. When one fails, others are not threatened. But what is learned by one can be shared with others to strengthen them.

Looking at current denominational systems, it is already clear that there exists a small percentage of local congregations that are antifragile and have found a way to thrive in the current environment of pandemics, schisms, and culture wars. These are congregations that are clear about their own individual purpose and mission, such as large staff-driven congregations and congregations that have found a way to individualize their participation in their own immediate neighborhoods.¹⁴ However, the learning that produces such antifragility in individual congregations is dampened, even destroyed, when denominational routinization, by continued focus on the uniformity of replicated structures, practices, and reporting on institutional measures, limits other curious congregations from learning and adapting to local neighborhood circumstances. Global and regional offices naturally seek to override and minimize local variation because a highly individualized system at the local level is difficult to lead and control from central offices. Yet, individual local congregations, when routinized by their own denominational system, are less responsive to local volatility and become increasingly fragile at threshold times. The pull between central offices with books of polity that control and routinize, and the need for the local congregation to diversify in order to thrive in its own unique setting, is a self-defeating, fragile relationship. Providing the freedom of local, individualized responses developed in relation to the immediate needs and preferences of the local neighborhood provides the learning needed to thrive, i.e., to be anti-fragile.

Considerations for Leaders Seeking Resilience

¹³ Taleb, p.106.

¹⁴ Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle, “Reimagining and Remapping the Religious Landscape: Chaos Before a New Ordering,” (Austin: Texas Methodist Foundation, 2025), pp. 19-25.

If there is any singular shift precipitated by a liminal time preceding a systems shift, it is that leaders must think (and give priority) to the local rather than to the regional or global. They must pursue (and preference) the specific rather than the general. The argument offered here is that resilience in denominational systems will be sourced from the congregational level of the system, not from regional or central offices.

It is a matter of control. As Margaret Wheatley argues, leaders must turn their attention away from what is beyond their control and focus on the people around them who are engaged in good work and are making progress on those things most important to who and why they are (again, attention guided by identity and purpose, which is essential to resilience). As she notes, “It is possible to use our influence and power to create islands of sanity in the midst of a raging, destructive sea.”¹⁵ She states clearly that leaders can no longer hope to solve the large systems problems at the global or regional levels. The time has passed when political, governmental, economic, or business leaders might have collaborated in ways to avoid the current liminal time that comes when a whole global order moves toward a self-organizing critical state.

Hope and promise for the future will now come from the local level. It will come from small enterprises, not major corporations. It will come from small community development projects, not state or national government actions. It will come from social entrepreneurs (religious or otherwise), not from large established institutions. It will come from local congregations and their clergy, not from denominations and their executives. It is a matter of control. It will come from the local level and leaders who can still identify and be driven by who and why they are meant to be.

Values, not Rules

One of the important clarifications that Tom Locke brought to our conversation-of-three was the observation that when an organization focuses its attention on the values that drive it, there is less need for rules. Values frame purpose – our *why*. They shape who we are and the way in which we are meant to behave. Rules

¹⁵ Margaret Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? – Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*, (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017), p.4

determine (and limit) our practice – our *how*. They determine how we are to go about (or not go about) our lives and our work. A focus on values provides freedom because values name what is critically important, but leave room and opportunity for trial and experimentation on how that importance is to be expressed. Leaders learn from their own practice when guided by values. Rules, on the other hand, are limiting and produce a rigidity because rules disallow the flexibility and experimentation needed when the surrounding environment changes so that what once worked no longer finds traction. There is little room for trial and error that can teach new things when rules only permit one right way. Consider again the dilemma of books of denominational polity like the United Methodist Book of Discipline, with 750 pages of rules and regulations that bring uniformity within the system but prohibit the flexibility and the new learning that can come only as clergy and congregations step outside of old rules to find their way in a deeply changed environment.

The definition of resilience that guides this writing is stated as an ecological principle at the beginning of this monograph. A similar framing of resilience that also comes from an ecological perspective on systems is that to be resilient is to be *steady in purpose*, but *flexible in strategy*. When an environment changes, an owl still needs to be the best owl it can be (identity and purpose), but must now adapt how and where it will nest and how and where to forage for what new or different prey may be about (strategy and practice) It is identity and purpose at the center – all else must be negotiable.

Shifting animal metaphors, this is the central factor Jim Collins referenced in his use of an essay about foxes and hedgehogs.¹⁶ Collins noted that the fox knows many things and can cunningly use its many tactics and tricks in pursuing prey. But no matter what tricks the fox may employ, the hedgehog knows one big thing – its identity and purpose. The hedgehog knows who it is and what it must, above all else, do. So that no matter what the fox might do – no matter what trick the fox might try – the hedgehog, as intended prey, will roll itself up into a ball of sharp spikes pointing outward in all directions. Resilience is knowing who one is and what singular gift one has that must be depended upon, no matter the surrounding changes.

16 Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*, (New York: Harper Business, 2001,) pp.90-91.

No matter how the story is told or what animal carries the tale, the critical lesson is that at the time of great need (a changing environment or a system at a threshold) what is most important is to understand and act from identity and purpose (value-driven) – not from tradition or regulation (rule-driven). Even in religious systems, purpose must outrank polity.

Which leads to the necessity and the use of the non-negotiables. What is it in an organization that cannot be ignored or changed but which shapes the very purpose and identity of the organization? Non-negotiables are not long lists of adjectives and characteristics designed to be inclusive so that the large number of “others” can see themselves as a part of the whole. Non-negotiables do not seek to reflect all the differences of long histories or multiple iterations of the organization over time. Non-negotiables are the small list of essentials that any and all must be able to claim for themselves and which are actually reflected in the way they go about their work. Either the parts accurately reflect the essential values that guide the whole, or they cannot be part of the whole.

Finding those non-negotiables is always a demanding and deliberate task for leaders. It is not the same as framing a mission statement (a tool that must continually change with changed circumstances). It is the core that must be preserved no matter the circumstances.

With no claim to have gotten it right – except for ourselves, and for the purpose of this monograph – when the conversation-of-three considered our own United Methodist Church, the non-negotiables settled into a list of three. We would argue that to be a United Methodist individual or congregation, one would need to:

1. Reflect and actively practice a theology of grace.
2. Practice a connection of care, learning, and support with all other Methodist individuals and congregations (based on shared identity and purpose, not on a shared structure or polity).
3. Honor and practice an open table (a welcome and inclusion of all others, without limits or barriers, simply because all have been created by God).

Being grace-filled; being connected in identity, purpose, and care; and being openly welcoming and inclusive – these are values, not strategies. To claim and be guided by these values is sufficient to be part of the United Methodist Church, without requiring adherence to all of the rules and regulations of polity. Being value-driven, not rule-restricted, each individual and each congregation must then find their own path to express and practice the non-negotiable values in the unique setting where they are placed. This is the nature of formation. It is also anti-fragility, i.e., resilience.

So, the argument to this point is that for a person or a congregation to be fully United Methodist at this cultural moment at the threshold of a system shift means to be guided by non-negotiable values of identity and purpose. Perhaps the notion of tight – loose is a helpful way to describe this moment. To be United Methodist, one must now hold the non-negotiable values very tightly and use them to determine actions, strategies, and practices. However, when it comes to other issues such as structure, funding, leadership deployment, use of property, and strategic connection to the local setting of ministry, the steps ahead must be held very loosely. They must be flexible to fit the setting. Congregations and leaders must exercise the freedom from routinization that will permit variation that produces local learning. Where so many of these issues and practices have been determined by a set of uniform rules and regulations, what is now needed is creative adaptation and learning. Being resilient, antifragile, means being connected but not centrally regulated. It means adhering closely to identity and purpose, but being creative and learning to adjust the local strategy of ministry.

As one would guess, this shift away from central control produces new challenges and hardships for individuals, congregations, and denominations. What was once determined by polity at a distance must now be given critical thought at the local level. Roles determined by a centrally controlled set of regulations must now also be evaluated by what is effective and what is not. What once had solid form must now be shaped by experimentation to learn what is appropriate and what will work in a liminal time.

Denominational Leadership in a Liminal Time

To capture resilience at the denominational level in our religious systems, the first order of response is to recognize that a new conversation is needed. Almost all of our denominations have experienced a pattern of membership decline beginning in the 1960s within the Mainline tradition. Over time, the shrinkage has also been experienced by denominations in the Evangelical tradition as well as in areas of Catholicism and Judaism. As denominational systems experience the loss of members and resources, it is natural for leaders to address questions driven by loss – How do they now do what they once did, but with fewer resources? What should now be given priority to keep a denominational system functional? How do they combine offices or restructure so that they can continue to address their primary agenda with fewer people and less dollars? How do they adapt their mission and/or mission statement to now reflect what they have the capacity to do?

To begin a new and different conversation, leaders would do well to rethink the nature and function of what a denomination is and what is needed in this liminal time. And here we will turn to the role of denominations, denominational offices, and officers, as infrastructure for their system. Our thinking will be heavily guided by the thoughts and writing of Sue Phillips, whose own work life has spanned the roles of a parish clergyperson, a denominational executive, and now a founding director of the tech-startup Emotional and Spiritual Technology West (west.co) where she holds the title of “Founding Ancient Technologist.” By role and experience, Phillips has a very wide overview of religion and spirituality from ancient times to future trends. In a helpful manner, she offers a perspective on the role of infrastructure as central to understanding denominations in this current liminal time.¹⁷

To begin, it is helpful to recognize both primary meanings of “infrastructure.” One definition refers to resources – the personnel, buildings, money, and equipment required for an organization to accomplish its work. Additionally, a second definition for infrastructure includes the underlying foundation or basic framework that defines a system or organization – its structure and the relationship between its parts. The

17 Sue Phillips. “The Spiritual Infrastructure of the Future: Stewards of religious assets should embrace spiritual innovators.” (Cambridge: Harvard Divinity Bulletin. 2024).

lens of infrastructure is important because, as Phillips points out, “infrastructure has always both reflected and created human relationships in all of their complexity.” We think and behave within an organization, such as a denomination, because of the way in which the organization and relationships are structured. What we know about an organization that has a central importance to our lives and to our work determines how we think about ourselves, our work, and how we relate to others who are connected to us through that organization. The infrastructure of an organization produces tacit norms within us – assumptions, practices, and personal behaviors that operate below our conscious awareness, where they hold a pervasive influence without being questioned. It is no wonder then that in times of stress the normative response of leaders is guided to what they most know, and know how to control, the familiar organizations and structures that have been central to their lives. The impulse in a liminal time is to seek to capture again what we most know and what once worked.

This is where Phillips challenges us and the tacit assumptions of denominations most directly. She moves the tacit assumptions to the conscious level to help us see what is really to be questioned in a liminal time. Consider the assumptions she names:

That religious communities are local, neighborhood-based, and have physical buildings. That congregations are the basic unit of denominational membership, and that individuals want to access religious experience through congregations. That clergy have a single job, and that it is housed at such congregations. That religious leaders are paid enough to support a family and pay off debt from theological education. That there’s a pipeline for and surplus of educators, liturgists, and religious professionals, and that they need a denominational hub to find and get jobs. That religious identity is transmitted generationally and that beliefs are inherited. That age-segregated classroom-style education models work well for spiritual foundation. That institutional mediation and leadership is essential in religious landscapes. That it is desirable for authority to be held by a few on behalf of the whole.

Of course, some of these assumptions are still sometimes true in some places, and of course, some communities defend against change as a matter of theological principle. But almost every one of these assumptions is severely challenged in the religious marketplace of

younger generations. Sociology scholars write that the hallmark attribution of infrastructure is that it only “becomes visible upon breakdown.” Infrastructure is very visible right now.¹⁸

The reality pointed to here is that in a liminal time, all that we have tacitly assumed is thrown into question. Recapturing a past (in structure or in practice) is not a sufficient response. Restructuring to keep current tacit norms and organizational infrastructure in place, even in simplified form, is not sufficient. The new conversation is not how do denominations do what they once did but with limited resources and simplified structure? The new conversation now is how the organizational, denominational practice of a faith can be resilient. How can it be steady in purpose, but highly flexible in strategy?

The new conversation now is how the organizational, denominational practice of a faith can be resilient.

How can it be steady in purpose, but highly flexible in strategy?

As noted above, in this liminal time, that which is under our control is found at the local level – the level where people see each other face-to-face, and despite differences on national or global issues, can identify and work together on immediate shared hopes and needs. The national and global issues that lead to a gridlock of oppositional contests do not have the same power at the community level, where people, despite their differences, can form functional relationships around shared hopes, fears, and opportunities. It is for this reason that, as stated earlier, the hope and promise of the future will now come from some local congregations and their clergy, not from denominations and their executives.

This primary shift in the locus of control from the denomination to the congregation is the central reality that must shape the new conversation needed at the denominational level.

If the learning and adaptation for the development of resilience in preparation for a new ordering of all our systems can best be done at the local level, how does a denomination reduce its own agenda and infrastructure to the smallest minimum

¹⁸ Phillips, p.5.

and transfer authority to adapt and learn to the local congregation and its clergy? Again, Phillips helps by using a technological perspective. Considered in technical terms, “infrastructure uses standardization and access protocols to connect disparate places and people even as local customizations flourish.”¹⁹ As an example, Phillips points to Japan’s interplanetary research as a local initiative with its own learning agenda and unique, creative forms of investigation. Even so, in order to connect to the International Space Station, Japanese spacecraft modules must all conform to

Large and unique
agendas of local
initiatives is where
learning takes place.

shared docking specifications along with all craft that use the Space Station. In this example, that which is unique, creative, fluid, and experimental (the Japanese research agenda and experiments) is large and depends on nimbleness and ever-changing questions. That which connects and facilitates shared space exploration (the International Space Station) does not impede the local research agenda with regulation

and standardization, but only requires a very much smaller standardized protocol for connection to the Space Station. Large and unique agendas of local initiatives is where learning takes place. These initiatives, with their potential for resilience, are impeded by standardization and restrictions from the connecting agency unless the standards and restrictions are kept to the barest minimum. Regulation and standardization are used only to connect, not to direct.

The new conversation at denominational levels cannot focus on how to fix things or how to restructure in order to recapture as much of the established old agenda as possible. The new conversation is how does a denomination learn to limit its new role to supporting the identity and purpose of its congregations and agencies and encourage their creativity in the threshold time.

The denomination needs to hold a much smaller agenda at its center. For example, denominations can no longer continue to require, control, and fix the problems experienced in the “clergy pipeline,” which standardizes the preparation and placement of all clergy. The changed economic realities impacting congregational budgets and clergy salaries, along with the breakdown of the once assumed educational preparation for clergy has already made the “clergy system” more mixed and fluid, with an increasing number of clergy no longer neatly fitting into

¹⁹ Phillips, p.2.

standardized categories. The more resilient agenda for the denomination is not the broad question of trying to get control of a frayed system. It is the smaller, focused, and much more important agenda of purpose and identity. It leads to questions that support resilience: how does a denomination support the understanding and practice of its non-negotiable identity and purpose with its collective of an increasingly diverse stable of congregations and clergy.

Janice Riggle Huie tells a story of a recent seminary graduate who was diligent in seminary training, even to the point of possibly being over-prepared theologically, only to discover that the Annual Conference clergy appointment system could find no placement for him in a congregation at a time when fewer appointments are available. Moving on after this disappointment, the seminary graduate discovered a gift for brewing beer and managing a brewery. The brewery developed a marketing and sales facility where large numbers of people regularly gathered around picnic tables in family and friendship groups to have energetic and supportive conversations. On reflection, the seminary graduate recognized that what he had in front of him at the brewery was exactly what he hoped for but could not work toward in a congregational appointment. This was not seminary training gone to loss because it was not being expressed through a congregation. This was seminary training allowing the graduate to recognize the setting right in front of him as congruent with the identity and purpose of the denomination he belonged to. Nonetheless, from a denominational perspective guided by its own regulatory standardization, there could be no way to recognize ministry expressed through a brewery gathering place. More deadening to the hope of resilience with its need to learn new strategies in a changed environment, there was no institutional way to recognize the ministry of one of the denomination's seminary graduates and to include him in the care, conversations, and connection that would both support him as well as help others learn new things about connections of ministry outside of a congregational building.

Instead of standardizing the preparation of clergy, the more resilient question for denominations is now more about how to develop and deploy theological guardrails that permit local interpretation in increasingly diverse settings but draws appropriate lines beyond which local interpretation no longer represents the identity and purpose of the denomination. As a resilient denomination in a liminal time, it may well be that it is more important for denominational executives to lead Bible studies with missional leaders wherever they are working than to have regulatory meetings

with standardized reporting with congregations. Bible study shapes and clarifies values and identity. Regulatory meetings reinforce rigidity and fragility.

The new conversation needed at the denominational level may well be how does the regulatory requirements of a denomination (its docking system, if you will) get trimmed down to its most minimal and essential form so that the missional, local congregation or ministry site be allowed maximal differentiation, experimentation, and learning that will connect to the local neighborhood. This is resilience in a liminal time.

As the conversation-of-three partner who has actually logged decades of experience as a bishop in the United Methodist Church, and who has served a term as President of the Council of Bishops, Janice is clear that trimming down denominational regulation is a critical conversation needed. She began her tenure at a time in which the role of a bishop was heavily managerial (regulatory). She was a leading voice in the Council of Bishops and in her Annual Conference assignments to change that managerial role and to seek missional change through the use of her office. Her experience now confirms that the heavy lifting of building resilience must be at the local level of the congregation. The new work at the various levels of the denomination is to shift their attention and effort in order to enable those congregations which have the capacity to be resilient, that is steady in purpose but flexible in strategy in their own local neighborhood.

Congregational Leadership in a Liminal Time

In any interconnected and interrelated system, to change the role and agenda of any one part of the system is to produce changes in all other parts of the system. If the denomination changes its role and agenda as described in the previous section, it will cause changes at the congregational level as well. Congregations and their leaders will no longer be responsible only to the routinized system of the denomination, which is rather a safe role to play because of how well this role is understood, even if not always followed. Instead, congregations will need to claim more authority for their own life and ministry at the local level where they live – in the neighborhood. The orientation for the congregation and for clergy shifts from satisfying denominational requirements to finding ways to be a participant in the very neighborhood in which

it lives in order to be an authentic representative of the identity and purpose of the denomination for which the congregation stands. Strategy and priorities are set by local hopes and needs rather than by Annual Conference themes or denominational directives. Measures of effectiveness become local, determined by the strategic changes within the neighborhood rather than standardized as a part of a large institution. In a liminal time, the orientation shifts from large to small, from regional to local, from denomination to congregation and neighborhood. Compared to following rules, this is much more difficult work for leaders.

This requires an act of courage on the part of the congregation and its leaders because it requires new learning. Consider that if the relationship between the congregation and the denomination is reduced to the most fundamental non-negotiables (i.e., the small standardized protocols that connect the spacecraft to the Space Station) then all else is negotiable – and the local congregation becomes responsible to negotiate for its own local strategy, its own local measures of what is important, for the development of its own structure, staffing, resources, and initiatives needed for the ministry as dictated by its local setting. What is not negotiable is its identity, its purpose, and its theology, which must remain within the theological and spiritual guardrails established by the denomination.

In a resilient system, the priority goes to the local level where the congregation frames the opportunities for ministry and is itself responsible for developing the local strategy to address that opportunity.

In a resilient system, the priority goes to the local level where the congregation frames the opportunities for ministry and is itself responsible for developing the local strategy to address that opportunity. And in stating its identity and purpose, the local church cannot limit itself to speaking in church talk that has developed through history as an internal conversation within the denomination. The congregation must speak and be present in the neighborhood in ways clearly understood by the neighbors. It has been well argued that all theology is local.²⁰ The congregation and its leaders must learn to first listen, and only then to speak in the local setting in ways that can be understood. Being clear on their identity and purpose, flexible in their strategies, and conversant with the neighborhood in understandable ways, the local congregation

20 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale. *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

reflects resilience – poised to experiment and be nimble in a culture that continues to approach a threshold that requires a steady purpose with a flexible strategy attached. Such steadiness, balanced with flexibility, requires the hard work to discover what is unique and appropriate to the local site of ministry and cannot be accomplished as a standardized expression of a large, established institution such as a denomination.

It is not the purpose of this monograph to trace the trends and patterns of what is being learned about the congregations that are learning to thrive in the fast-changing environment of a liminal time. Conversations about thriving congregations are already in place and can be joined by the curious in multiple settings. What is being argued here is that congregations that are steady in purpose but flexible in strategy are the learning arm of a faith tradition and must stand somewhat outside of the routinized standardization of the denomination to do their work.

Certainly not all congregations will find it possible to make the transition to be responsible for their own strategies of ministry with a focus on the neighborhood outside of their present membership. It is very possible to be too old, to have too few resources, or to be so embedded in tradition (i.e., locked into the established assumptions and practices of the old systems) to risk the transformation required. The well-established Pareto Principle (or the 80/20 Rule) suggests that 80% of the needed outcomes that will lead to resilience within established faith traditions will come from just 20% of its system. If that be the case, the denomination and the 20% of its congregations that will lead the way in learning will need to change their relationship from regulatory to collaborative, from top down to bottom up. Resilience begins with a reordering of the system and a changed relationship between its parts.

A Final Consideration: Resilience as Defiance

In our conversation-of-three, a significant but less organizational consideration about resilience that is important to include is the need for defiance in a liminal time.

One of the lessons to be learned about a liminal time is that the boundaries that once kept people and issues in an ordered setting are removed. When boundaries are removed, the old order is weakened, and people and issues suddenly begin a contest to

claim more attention and importance than they had been previously allowed. Perhaps an example in a congregation can be of help here.

Over a decade ago, Gil served as a consultant to a very large, very healthy, Mainline congregation. Gil worked with the leaders of the congregation periodically over a three-year period during which the long-tenured, well-loved, and very gifted senior clergy person was retiring, and a new senior leader needed to be called. There are many moving parts in any organization going through such a change in primary leadership. A time of transition prompted by a leadership transition is its own version of a minimal period in which people very clearly remember (and may want to recapture) their past, and are anxious and worried about a future that they can't quite yet see. People, leaders in particular, need help to understand their role and to control their anxiety – much of which is accomplished by being transparent about the process of transition and by clarifying who has authority (and who lacks authority) to direct the process.

When boundaries are removed, the old order is weakened, and people and issues suddenly begin a contest to claim more attention and importance than they had been previously allowed.

One of the surprises in this particular transition was that old issues that had previously been settled in this congregation reemerged with new energy. Specifically, this congregation had been in a contest a few years earlier about the issue of homosexuality both in the culture and in their congregation. Being a very large congregation, one would expect a range of different and competing opinions on such an issue. The congregation's earlier contest was also during a period in which homosexuality was a hot-button topic in their denomination.

The way in which this congregation settled their contest of competing opinions was through their senior pastor. After careful listening to the various subgroups of members for which this was an important issue, the senior pastor took a stand of theological leadership. He accurately reported the different opinions he heard in his conversations with members. He also reported that he understood why people would hold those differing opinions. Then he said, in effect, "...but in this congregation we will..." and he gave both his personal and his theological reasons for claiming the position he wanted the congregation to take. He set a boundary. People could still hold

their opinion if they chose. But the boundary was a fence they could not cross in their congregation by trying to get others to agree with them. Out of respect for the senior pastor, and for the health of the congregation they loved, the competing subgroups ceased their contest and observed the boundary that their leader put in place.

Years later, the surprise in the mini-liminal time of the retirement of the senior pastor was that once the impending retirement was announced, “the fence went down.” Knowing that they would soon have a new leader, the small subgroups still bothered by the issue of homosexuality resurfaced in an effort to gather more support and gain more territory for their preferred position on the issue. The arrival of a new senior clergyperson was viewed as an opportunity for a new order of things, for which the subgroups wanted more space for their position as well as more say over others.

If the experience in that large congregation is the mini-example, then the corollary is that “the fence goes down” around many issues in the same way at a cultural liminal time, and the contest becomes framed as a question of identity – i.e., who are we as a people, and what is the right way for us to live now? At its steepest pitch, this fence-down-contest is known as a culture war.

The current reality is that in the present moment, within our own nation, there are those “at war” seeking to capture more attention and importance for their own worldview. Where some cling to the democratic values stemming from the period of the Enlightenment, others battle for the authority and power of an aristocracy / oligarchy / tyranny. Where some argue that health and wealth depend upon a strong middle class, others argue that health and wealth can only be provided by the most wealthy through a trickle-down system. Where some want to label immigrants as unwanted criminals, others want to see those same immigrants as the strangers that their faith says need a strong welcome. Where some work toward a multi-racial, multi-colored, multi-originated nation as the promise of a global future, others claim that the white race has supremacy and priority over all others. The fact that these same contests are active in other countries around the world is further evidence that we are at a tipping point – an all-encompassing global self-ordered criticality. The reordering to come will go far beyond which American political party wins the next election. More than the *next* day, we are awaiting results to see the *new* day.

Importantly, these contests are about who we should be and how we should behave in the future. They are about identity and purpose. They are strong voices, in pitched battle, seeking to define and control the future by determining who and how we will be as a people.

From the very beginning of this monograph, resilience has been defined as the capacity of a system or enterprise to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances. In a liminal time in which strong warring voices seek to control who a people will be, resilience is defiance. It is maintaining core purpose and integrity in the face of confusing cultural competitions. When the whole world seems to be broiling from the heat of arguments about who we are and how we will be – it matters that individuals and congregations stand strong and say clearly:

I am a person / we are a people who

- Reflect and actively practice a theology of grace
- Practice a connection of care, learning, and support for all others like us who believe in grace
- Honor and practice an open table to which *all* people are invited.

In the mix of a heated battle over identity, behavior, and the future, resilience (being steady in purpose and flexible in strategy) is an act of defiance.

Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle served as writer in the drafting of this monograph.