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Resilience in Ministry: Listening to the Voice of Church of Scotland Ministers

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the present study is to analyse the qualitative text written on the back page of a quantitative survey concerned with resilience in ministry among ministers serving in the Church of Scotland. Of the 505 ministers who took part in the survey, 176 wrote further (sometimes detailed) comments on the back page (35% participation rate). Three main themes emerged from these comments concerned with different aspects of resilience in ministry. The first theme concerns definitions of resilience from the perspective of these ministers. The second theme concerns the challenges to resilience highlighted by ministers including: workload and stress, ill health and family issues, tensions with changing theology and apathy to Christianity, conflicts with congregations, and problems with wider church structures. The third theme concerns the coping strategies and support mechanisms identified by ministers as essential for resilience including: personality and self-care resources, and interrelationships with family, friends, peers, the church institution, and outside agencies.

*Keywords:* resilience, clergy studies, ministry, quantitative surveys, qualitative data

### Introduction

The Oxford dictionary defines resilience as ‘The capacity to recover quickly from problems; toughness. The ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity’ (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/resilience>). The essence of this definition can be found in the professional and psychological literature on resilience at work and in professional and personal life. For Lee (2010, p. 632), who draws on the work of McCubbin et al. (1997) into resilient families, resilience ‘encompasses both *elasticity*, the ability to maintain one’s level of functioning in the face of challenges, and *buoyancy*, the ability to recover or ‘bounce back’ even after disruptions to functioning.’ Likewise, for Carr (2011, p. 364) resilience is the ‘capacity to withstand exceptional stresses and demands without developing stress related problems’. For others, resilience goes beyond simply facing adversity and includes the potential for personal development. Hence, according to an education web service aimed at improving people’s lives both professionally and personally, ‘resilience is the ability to cope with and rise to the inevitable challenges, problems and setbacks you meet in the course of your life, and come back stronger from them’ (<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/resilience.html>). In this definition resilience is about bouncing forward rather than bouncing back. While similar definitions can be found in the wider academic literature, there is also great diversity in the use of the term. Indeed, seventeen distinct definitions of resilience found in research-based literature are presented by Hart et al. (2016, p.3) with one of the most frequently quoted being that by Masten (2011, p. 494) that resilience is the ‘capacity of a dynamic system to withstand and recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development.’ Where most of these writers agree is that resilience is not just a characteristic of an individual, but that it can also be ecologically contextualised.

There is a growing research literature on the topic of resilience in children, young people and families, including the extensive work of Angie Hart, within the Centre of Resilience for Social Justice at the University of Brighton, that examines the resilience research literature currently shaping the field and documents how understanding and definitions of resilience have evolved in the course of research (Ungar, 2005; Masten, 2011; Southwick et al., 2014; Hart et al., 2016). However, there are few empirical studies which look specifically at the experiences of those in ministry. Rather, existing research among clergy has tended to focus on burnout, stress and job satisfaction (Muse, 2007; Chandler, 2009; Doolittle, 2010; Lee, 2010; McDevitt, 2010; Jackson-Jordan, 2013; Visker, Rider, & Humphers-Ginther, 2017; Adams et al., 2017; Francis, 2018) and on aspects of mental health and psychological wellbeing (Weaver et al., 2002; Gubi, 2016). Furthermore, a number of the quantitative surveys in these areas, undertaken among various denominations of clergy within the USA, have called for further research. For example, Weaver et al. (2002, p. 402) concluded that, ‘more research on the positive aspects of ministry is needed in order to better understand how to enhance its rewards and decrease unnecessary hardships’; Chandler (2009, p.285) concluded that, ‘further empirical inquiry is imperative to expand the theoretical foundations for pastoral health and vitality; and Jackson-Jordan (2013, p. 4), in one of the few reviews of the literature to include resilience alongside burnout, suggested that, ‘additional research to identify strengths and coping skills that contribute to clergy resilience is needed’.

In response to the paucity of research concerned specifically with the notion of resilience among clergy in the UK, the aim of the current study was to gain an in-depth understanding of resilience as captured by the experience and understanding of practising ministers. While acknowledging that some question the use of the term resilience and suggest that resilience research is flawed (see Ungar, 2005, pp. xx-xxii), a good case can be made that, instead of focusing on the negative experiences of those who are struggling to cope or

who are experiencing burnout, resilience researchers focus on the positive experiences of those who succeed, and in doing so highlight possible ways forward.

### **Research aims**

Against this background, the present study seeks to add to the existing literature in four ways. First, following the example of Rolph et al. (2015), the aim was to take seriously the data entered on the back page of the questionnaire. According to Rolph et al. (2015) quantitative surveys routinely dedicate the back page for participants to offer their own narrative comments, but often these comments are neither analysed nor reported. Hence, the present study will analyse these narrative responses, reporting the views and opinions of clergy themselves. Second, the research focused on exploring resilience among a UK Christian denomination (Church of Scotland) that has not been previously studied. Third, the research looks specifically at the concept of resilience, rather than burnout, a concept not as extensively examined in existing research or reviewed in the literature relating to clergy. Fourth, the research adds to the work of Ungar (2005), Lee (2010), Jackson-Jordan (2013), Southwick et al. (2014), and Francis (2018) by highlighting the challenges to resilience experienced by ministers and reporting on the coping strategies and support mechanisms identified by them.

In order to achieve these four aims the method used reflected some of the research procedures associated with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1998; Gibbs, 2009; Birks & Mills, 2015), most notably in relation to analysis of the responses and the emergence and structuring of the key themes within the data. The aim was to produce analyses that captured the voice of Church of Scotland ministers and that accurately reflected their perspectives and feelings on resilience in ministry. Where the approach differed from pure grounded theory was that concurrent data collection and analysis, fundamental to grounded theory research design, did not take place. Data collection and analysis did not

overlap and did not inform one another. In this study analysis only began once all questionnaires had been received. There was no further collection of data. According to Birks and Mills (2015, pp. 22-23), who draw on the work of Glaser (1998), a formal review of the literature is delayed in grounded theory to prevent the researcher imposing existing theories or knowledge on the study processes and outcomes. In this study, the decision to consult the literature was made only when all responses had been transcribed and it was realised that the key themes identified in the data being rich and informative might be useful to the Church of Scotland.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

In 2017 a survey among ministers, deacons and locums (collectively now referred to as ministers) serving in the Church of Scotland was commissioned by the General Assembly as part of its commitment to support those engaged in ministry. The survey was sent by post under a covering letter from the Moderator of the Church of Scotland. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. In total 505 Church of Scotland ministers completed the survey. The survey included sections on: time spent on ministry functions; feelings about ministry, life and faith; physical and spiritual wellbeing and mental health; and role responsibilities and career path.

### **Participants**

Of the 505 ministers who participated in the survey 67% were male and 33% were female; 85% were classified as ministers, 4% as deacons, and 11% as locums. Of the 176 clergy who completed the back page of the questionnaire; 64% were male and 35% were female; 84% were ministers, 12% were deacons and 4% were locums.

### **Instrument**

The back page of the questionnaire simply invited participants as follows: ‘On this page offer your comments on resilience in ministry’

### **Analysis**

All the written responses were transcribed in full and entered into a *Word* document. Initial analysis involved reading through the responses several times to identify key ideas. The majority of responses were kept verbatim and an overall decision made on what general idea was being expressed by each minister. Key ideas in each response were highlighted in order to identify recurrent themes. Ministers expressing similar themes were then grouped together. Close scrutiny of these groups revealed three broad categories: those ministers who were defining resilience in some way; those who were highlighting the challenges they faced which tested their resilience; and those who identified the coping strategies and support mechanisms on which they often drew to protect or increase their resilience. Further analysis revealed that some of these categories could be broken down into subthemes, so for instance the category of challenges to resilience had within it the subthemes of: everyday issues related to the job itself (eg, stress, workload), personal worries (eg, ill health and family issues), theological tensions and concern about apathy toward the Church and Christianity, conflicts with congregations and practical concerns (mostly around the Manse), and difficulties experienced with wider church structures. Likewise, the category on coping strategies and support mechanisms for resilience could be split into internal coping strategies (mostly related to personal factors, lifestyle, and self-care), and external support which could be split into the informal (spouse, family, peers, and friends) and formal (Presbytery, National Church, support groups, and external agencies). Interestingly, these key themes arising from the data cohere with a large body of existing resilience research literature that focuses on what it terms: definitions, risk factors, and protective factors.



Overall the focus was on the presentation of an accurate account of what the Church of Scotland ministers, when reviewed together, had to say about resilience in ministry. This was an exercise in taking seriously the issues and themes recorded by the ministers on the back page after they had been stimulated by and reflected on the questions posed earlier in the survey. What these comments add to the wider study is a sense of the openness and honesty with which the clergy were willing to speak of resilience and their personal experiences within this area. It is through these quotations that we can hear the voices of the participants and learn from their insights. In doing so the research is paying attention to the advice of those from other disciplines (see Southwick et al., 2014) that the most important and effective way to approach resilience is to start with listening to what people have to say about their everyday lives keeping the focus on empirical data in order to determine exactly what different groups mean by resilience.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Defining resilience**

According to Lee (2010), within the literature on clergy some authors have begun using the language of resiliency to refer to coping resources but few studies have actually defined the term. Lee criticises the work of Meek et al. (2003), for reporting ‘the results of two qualitative studies of the ‘personal resiliency’ of pastors, but without defining the term or referring to the extant literature on the subject’ (Lee, 2010, p. 632). In light of the many definitions and a lack of empirical research exploring this term with clergy within the UK, how do Church of Scotland ministers define the term?

The majority of ministers who defined or reflected on what resilience meant to them tended to see it as a personal trait, an aspect of their inner being and inner strength:

I think resilience comes with your character and upbringing. (Female, 60-69)

Think resilience has to do with my whole ‘psyche’/nature and life events experienced.

(Female, 50-59)

Resilience in ministry comes from being a resilient person. This is based on the knowledge that you are special and loved in your own right – not for what you do or achieve. (Male, 60-69)

Some ministers illustrate in their responses the ability to see the challenges they have faced as a form of helpful feedback and in doing so recognise potential for personal development:

I am currently less than 2 months into a new charge... However, in a previous charge I was subject to bullying – there was a long-standing culture of this – and this experience has helped me to stand back and be more objective and considered in how I deal with difficult and challenging people and structures. (Female, 40-49)

I perceive that resilience is based on that ability to be carried through the negative experiences to a greater understanding both of the impact of ministry and personal satisfaction. These things seem in better balance now than in an early stage of my current ministry when I entered a very conflicted situation and my personal resilience was threatened. (Male, 50-59)

These two ministers illustrate the same point being made by Yehuda (2014, p.3) who holds that ‘a definition of resilience as it applies to people would involve a reintegration of self that includes a conscious effort to move forward in an insightful integrated positive manner as a result of lessons learned from an adverse experience’ (see Southwick et al., 2014, p. 3).

For other ministers resilience included an understanding of their identity which incorporated a relationship with Jesus Christ:

Personally, I think a lot is to do with i) a strong sense of call – knowing you are where God means you to be ii) a living relationship with the Lord Jesus and an understanding of our true identity in Christ. (Female, 40-49)

It is not surprising that it was also within this category of response that ministers made the most mentions of ‘call’ or ‘calling’:

I believe that the sense of ‘calling’ is paramount. Whether or not you can make sense of where you are, what you are doing or where you are heading, having a firm belief in the fact that ‘you are called’ to be where you are and do what you are doing, helps to give you courage to try new things and offers a feeling of security and purpose when things are difficult. (Female, 60-69)

Resilience comes from recognising that personal output in ministry is greater than inner resources and input... If you arrive in ministry with a less than robust inner self then difficulties will arise. There is no hiding place in ministry. In other vocations/professions it may be possible to coast and self-manage. I often ask God – why call me? But he did and left me no choice. Surely he also equipped for calling. (Male, 60-69)

At times this sense of calling and a minister’s sense of resilience clashes with the reality of congregational life and the demands placed on ministers both personally and professionally. Hence, it is not surprising that many of the ministers wrote about times when their resilience was challenged.

### **Challenges to resilience**

For the large number of ministers (approximately seventy) who articulated the challenges to resilience that they had experienced, the following themes were identified: everyday workload and stresses of the job; personal problems such as ill health, neglect of

self and family breakdown; tensions with changing theology and the perception of growing apathy toward both the Church and Christianity; challenges from congregations and from living in the Manse; and concerns about their relationship with the wider church, its leadership (Presbytery), and its management structures.

Everyday workload and stress was identified as a challenge to resilience by over twenty ministers:

Ministers are expected to know so much and carry huge responsibilities. Some have admin support, some have pastoral or youth workers but many have none. In other organisations or institutions, bar small self-employers, would the ratio of staff to clients be so poor? (Female, 40-49)

After almost 40 years of ordained ministry, I love the job, the people but the stresses have become enormous. (Male, 60-69)

The demands of ministry nowadays are much more challenging than before. In the 80/90s I worked in one parish with a full time colleague and had a clearly defined remit of duties and responsibilities. Nowadays I feel much more stressed than before. It's frustrating to feel that each week goes by simply trying to keep my head above water, attending to the daily demands, rather than making time to accompany people into a deeper relationship with God/community/faith. (Female, 60-69)

These Church of Scotland ministers are drawing attention to the demands of parish ministry. Previous research has looked at this issue with the findings suggesting that while churches with smaller congregations may lead to ministers experiencing extra workload due to there being fewer people to whom to delegate (Kaldor & Bullpitt, 2000), being responsible for multiple churches did not increase this risk (Francis, Robbins, & Wulff, 2013a). Likewise, research by Orthner (1986), with nearly 2,000 American Methodist ministers, found such

clergy constantly at the call of their parishioners and community. They had to take on multiple roles beyond that of a preacher, to include teacher, counsellor, administrator, and fundraiser, all of which were demanding of their time and energy. While ministers may experience great satisfaction in their work the potential impact of these everyday sources of stress need to be acknowledged. For example, Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge (2004) reported on a study among 1,468 Catholic parochial clergy in England and Wales. The study highlighted the difficulties of parish ministry and found that, while these Catholic clergy had very high levels of personal accomplishment, they also recorded quite high levels of emotional exhaustion.

The Church of Scotland ministers were also very honest in acknowledging that tests on their resilience were at times due to their own personal circumstances rather than as a consequence of the job they did. The challenges they identified included the need to cope with personal sources of stress, such as family and relationship breakdown, neglect of self, and serious health concerns, including their physical and emotional wellbeing. In this area fourteen ministers wrote openly about the personal struggles they faced:

The stresses in my life at the moment (only 2 months into ordained ministry following 15 months probation) are largely due to personal circumstances – spouse suffering from...and being unemployed. (Female, 30-39)

Relating to my own experience...my personal life, marital breakdown, single parenting, bereavement, cancer and chemotherapy...‘121’ support was/is excellent...

The majority of my stress is outwith my control and relates to my personal life. (Male, 50-59)

My current physical health is the biggest stress factor and contrasts with my satisfaction in ministry...all in all stress factors and resilience are for me not related to ministry or only indirectly so. (Female, 40-49)

The impact of such personal problems on work life has been investigated (Weaver et al., 2002; Muse, 2007; Gubi, 2016). For example, Weaver et al. (2002, pp. 398-400) provide a comprehensive review of the literature on marital adjustment and family stress in clergy environments. Muse (2007, p. 183) concluded that it was the clergyperson's home where the wellbeing and quality of family life had been identified as critical but was often an overlooked factor in successful ministry. While acknowledging the personal nature of some of the challenges faced by these ministers, it is important not to focus solely on these. As Ungar (2005) cautions, too much focus on individuals with the expectation that they themselves should overcome their problems and difficulties denies the very real structural constraints that they may face.

A number of ministers wrote about their resilience being challenged due to current times being a period of great change and challenge for the Church. One area highlighted concerned uncertainty about the theological direction of the Church. For example, some ministers felt that their own theology had remained static while the Church had become extremely liberal:

The Church of Scotland's stance on same sex relationships and the ministry has disheartened me and made me question my long term commitment in that denomination. I feel sometimes the Church of Scotland is undermining my call to serve Christ, rather than supporting it. (Male, 60-69)

One of the great struggles just now in the Church of Scotland is their constant drive towards very liberal policies – which are in tension with orthodox-theology and

biblical understanding. This causes discouragement – it undermines many of our pulpits and the teaching and preaching that goes on week by week. It causes confusion in congregations and disinterest. This then undermines a biblical sense of call to ministry – which is often the way many have been called to serve in the Church in the past (ie. which part of the Bible do we believe – and which part are we reinterpreting – or contextualising?). (Male, 50-59)

The greatest stress for me is feeling out of place and unwanted as an Evangelical in an increasingly ‘Progressive’ denomination. (Male, 50-59)

Alongside this there was concern about the reality of both a declining Church and a perceived growing apathy to Christianity:

Theologically I can face defeat in personal terms and deeply believe that it’s not the end of the world. I find the apathy towards the Christian religion challenging. (Male, 60-69)

In my experience, it is changing social attitudes (more hostile or indifferent towards faith or church) that is the most taxing issue when it comes to resilience in ministry. (Male, 50-59)

The main issue for me at the moment is that I see the church in terminal decline and very few people are willing to admit this. This casts a shadow over everything that we do. (Female, 60-69)

Although it is clear that for these ministers their church is facing struggle in terms of trying to identify its role in modern society, these tensions with changing theology and with apathy toward the Church and Christianity have not been well documented in the existing research on resilience in ministry. Related to these tensions were challenges identified which

referred to the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly relationships with their congregations and also with the Church itself:

Congregations and office bearers need to develop an understanding and plan for supporting their minister... the atmosphere of bullying and abuse needs to be 'outed' as unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. This is not simply about creating resilience in the minister. (Female, 40-49)

I also believe the church needs to recognise situations and places of toxicity within congregations. (Female, 30-39)

Training for ministry and expectations of congregations are far removed from one another. Experiences gained in the first few years could have been better prepared for in training...Congregations perhaps 'mentored' in what expectations and possibilities are reasonable. (Female, 50-59)

Sometimes these challenges were heightened due to the fact that ministers were living very close to their congregations. Some ministers responded specifically about the challenge of living in the Manse:

Church of Scotland ministers must occupy the manse usually located in the parish, often next door, or close to the church itself. I often think that I might be able to experience more of a complete break from ministry if my family and I were able to live in a house of our choice, in an area of our choice. This might provide the opportunity to have a total break from the pastoral issues that one cannot avoid when 'bumping' into parishioners in the parish supermarket, bus stop, garden centre etc... Living in the parish, as Church of Scotland ministers must do, is like living in the office! I don't think that's a good thing for us all. (Male, 50-59)



That clergy are often vulnerable to the needs of parishioners has been identified in the findings of other studies. Kaldor and Bullpitt (2000) found clergy who were skilful in their ability to handle parishioners also had greater longevity in their parishes. Likewise, a study of 312 Protestant clergy in America by Lee and Iverson-Gilbert (2003) suggested that clergy who perceived their congregations as more demanding (as opposed to the frequency of demands) reported a lower sense of wellbeing and life satisfaction, and greater burnout.

The final theme highlighted as challenging to the resilience of these Church of Scotland ministers was related to the wider church and its leadership and management structures:

A sense of alienation from ‘the central church’, whose management language I struggled to relate to and whose expectations of ministers seem different from what I thought I was called to do. (Male, 50-59)

At least nineteen ministers mentioned a feeling that there was a lack of support from Presbytery and the National Church, and for some a feeling of detachment and isolation:

Ministry can at times be very draining and the planning issues which Presbytery has had to undertake have caused me most issues in all my 28 years of ministry, causing me for the only time ever in my ministry to feel guilty, of little worth, angry and even to consider leaving the ministry and the Church of Scotland... found the planning done by Presbytery the most awful experience ever – and it has created real issues for which I have required and still require a lot of resilience. (Female, 50-59)

The stress comes from a National church that still expects fewer and fewer people to do as much as twice the number of ministers did in the past. Presbytery plans and the guilt of knowing that many a congregation goes to linkage or union is major problem.

There is NO support to help ministers cope with Presbytery plans, and there will be a generation of ministers who will leave before the church notices. (Male, 50-59)

Some ministers were acutely aware of the interplay of many of these challenging factors:

There are a huge range of problems which affect resilience, such as the continuing one minister/one charge model; the persistent sense that decline is the fault of the minister; the increasing burden put on ministers because most members are getting older and less able; the pressure to 'birth' fresh expressions; the increase in laws and regulations in the church; and the sense of being utterly tied into an institution upon which we depend for income, housing and pension...A huge amount of effort is put into maintaining an institutional model which is no longer fit for purpose. (Male, 40-49)

In terms of identifying challenges to resilience, or what other resilience research literature refers to as risk factors, these data add to existing work, particularly in the field of occupational health (Howard, 2008), with young people and families (Ungar, 2005; Masten, 2011; Southwick et al., 2014; Hart et al., 2016), studies undertaken on stress and burnout (Chandler, 2009; Doolittle, 2010; McDevitt, 2010; Jackson-Jordan, 2013), and on reasons for leaving ministry (Muse, 2007). Much of the existing research-based literature is focused on everyday stress and workload issues, the psychological health of ministers, and relationships with congregations. The data from these Church of Scotland ministers would suggest that more research into the impact on ministers of tensions caused by changing theology and the perceived growing apathy toward the Church would be helpful. It also suggests that relationships with the wider Church, its leadership and management structures including Presbytery, need further investigation. Analysis of the quantitative data within the wider

survey may help with further investigation as to which out of all these challenges are most significant.

### **Supporting and promoting resilience**

What is noticeable in the more recent resilience research literature is a shift toward efforts to promote resilience rather than a focus solely on reducing risks. According to Lee (2010) inherent in the study of resilience is the ability to move away from a primary emphasis on risk factors toward an examination of the importance of protective factors and processes that make individuals less vulnerable to stress: ‘applied to clergy, the empirical question becomes, What characteristics might help pastors to be less susceptible to the potentially deleterious effects of the demands of ministry?’ (Lee, 2010, p. 632). Nearly forty of the Church of Scotland ministers gave responses that were primarily focused on explaining how they believed resilience could be positively promoted, with many drawing on their own experience of the support from which they had benefitted and the coping strategies that they had used.

Consistent with those ministers who defined resilience as related to their own personality or character and those ministers that assigned the challenges they faced to their own personal problems, twenty of the ministers who chose to write about ways to support or promote resilience did so in ways which put the responsibility for making their lives better on themselves. In particular, they drew attention to their own physical wellbeing, self-care, and life-style choices, mentioning the need to be disciplined in holding to a worklife balance, the willingness to pursue outside hobbies, and the ability to set boundaries in relation to others:

For me, resilience is a discipline which has to be cultivated in one’s lifestyle. Much about resilience can be taught – but at the end of the day, it is connected to self-discipline and the cultivation of a well-balanced lifestyle. (Anon)

I don't buy into the cult of relentless busyness the Kirk seems to be riddled with. I take holiday and have at least a day off per week. If I didn't, I'd go nuts. I'm in this for the long-term, knowing I'm not indispensable, and chasing ways to avoid burnout. I serve my folk best by being present, not signed off with stress/ill health! (Female, 50-59)

I am very self contained as a person and can easily 'switch off' and enjoy my hobbies. I think that it is important to keep a 'professional distance' towards parishioners and others which suits my personality very well. (Male, 60-69)

Similar findings have been reported by Doolittle (2010) who undertook research with 358 Methodist clergy in the USA to identify the prevalence of burnout, correlating these data with protective behaviours. Doolittle concluded that clergy who had the ability to establish healthy boundaries and time management skills were less likely to burnout and that 'clergy who create the space to engage in outside activities may also have the ability and the emotional capacity to disengage from their ministerial demands, thereby re-energizing themselves' (Doolittle, 2010, p. 93).

For others, alongside good time management, their own style of leadership was identified as important:

I believe one of the key factors in building up resilience in ministry is to enable people in one's congregation to share in the ministry of the church, to enable people to exercise their talents and gifts, rather than seeking to micro-manage everything. (Male, 50-59)

This minister reflects one of the findings highlighted by Kaldor and Bullpitt (2000) that clergy who were able to delegate responsibilities fared better than those tending to do all the jobs themselves. He also illustrates the conclusion made by Muse (2007, p. 183) that it is a

minister's leadership style that is important in terms of the 'ability to draw on awareness of personal style, skills in conjunction with motivations stemming from the sense of call in order to accomplish the tasks of ministry.'

For other ministers promoting and protecting resilience was more closely connected to their relationships with those around them and knowing when and how to ask others for help and support. This external support could be informal in terms of relationships with spouse, family, friends and peers, or formal in terms of supervision and contact with wider church management or assistance from outside agencies:

Resilience has been the name of the game for 50 years. The heroine is my long-suffering wife! (Male, 70+)

I have found having a good strong family have been hugely beneficial in the ups and downs of ministry. I also have a group of friends and a support group of 3 persons with no church connection, which is healthy for me. (Male, 60-69)

A number of ministers mentioned self-organised peer groups set up in their current charge or carried over from their training days.

I am part of a team ministry where 5 charges, 4 parish ministers and a team minister work in co-operation. We meet weekly and this creates a really sound foundation for resilience. (Male, 60-69)

With almost 25 years in ministry I have benefitted from a peer group support network. Established in our final year of training we've met 3 times per year since. (Male, 60-69)

According to some of the ministers the practice of formal supervision either provided by the wider church organisation or by outside facilitators offered a vehicle to build resilience.

My resilience in ministry was greatly aided by being part of a program that offered a monthly meeting with an experienced minister to talk over the challenges and experiences in my first year of ministry. (Male, 40-49)

My resilience in ministry has grown through the years. As an interim minister I have an extended team of colleagues and line manager who offer support and guidance.

The coaching programme in Church of Scotland is great – inspirational. Think ministers benefit greatly from help and support – but need to be willing to engage in it – some are not. (Female, 50-59)

Better training required for the realities of congregational life. Bridge-builders ‘Transforming Church Conflict’ course I took in 2012 was brilliant and should be compulsory for folk entering ministry. (Male, 40-49)

Outside assistance: our congregation took part in a stressful 3-way union. Without the help of an outside, neutral facilitator/mediator, the union would not have gone as well and I would have found it very, very difficult. SO, for resilience in ministry, the presence of outside, trained people was of enormous benefit. (Male, 50-59)

Many ministers viewed their family, peer and mentor relationships as their primary support system. According to Jackson-Jordan (2013, p. 2) the evidence suggests that building a strong network of relationships in this way may protect clergy from emotional exhaustion. Church of Scotland ministers clearly identified support groups as an aspect of coping. However, further research into the presence, quality, and impact of support systems may be needed in light of the fact that the findings of studies looking at the use of support groups have not always cohered. Chandler (2009) investigated support system practices (eg, support groups, family, mentor, friend, peer) in relation to burnout among 270 pastors in 20 denominational and non-denominational churches and networks in the USA and found that,

with the exception of family support, none of the other support system items emerged as preventative predictors of burnout. Chandler concluded that ‘this begs the question as to the presence and quality of participants’ support system practices’ (Chandler, 2009, p. 285). In contrast, a recent small study by Gubi (2016, pp. 350-355) with bishop’s advisors and clergy from three dioceses in the Church of England found that reflexive groups, facilitated by an external counsellor/psychotherapist, were psychologically beneficial to clergy. The research concluded that the implementation of reflexive groups as a way of developing self-awareness and modifying attitudes towards resilience and self-care was important to foster psychologically and spiritually healthy practice. Similarly, Francis and Turton (2004), drawing on data provided by 1,276 Anglican clergymen, found that, while regular engagement with supervision designed to encourage reflective practice in ministry was unrelated to levels of emotional exhaustion, it was associated with higher levels of satisfaction in ministry.

More recently, Francis, Robbins, and Wulff (2013b) tested the effectiveness of support strategies (defined as spiritual director, mentor, peer group, study leave, and sabbatical) in reducing professional burnout among clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA). While none of the five strategies served as predictors of lower levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry, two of them did serve as predictors of enhanced satisfaction in ministry, namely having a mentor and taking study leave. Study leave was only briefly mentioned in responses from six Church of Scotland ministers: two ministers bemoaned the loss of it; two ministers had taken it during their career; and two felt it was not beneficial either because it created more work or because they felt ‘time out to do life in other ways should be a legitimate allowance after several years work, “study leave” is not the answer’ (Female, 40-49).

In summary, in identifying support systems and coping strategies that enhance their resilience, these Church of Scotland ministers illustrate the protective factors discussed by Hart et al. (2016, p. 2) in that support can reside both internally, drawing largely upon an individual's psychological resources, and externally, placing responsibility upon peers, colleagues, congregations, and the organisation itself, to think about what they can do to make a difference. Some Church of Scotland ministers recognised this interplay between wider institutional factors and the individual and offered advice for their Church going forward:

The demands of ministry are changing. The expectations of declining congregations (particularly in rural areas) are not. There is an urgent need for resources (supervisory/spiritual and financial) to be instituted so that ministers feel they have an immediate contact within Church of Scotland to confer with on matters of concern within their ministry, which may be in some ways unique to C of S, or to ministers. Other denominations have much more developed sense of support/accompaniment. I welcome current initiatives. (Female, 40-49)

Ministry is exciting, enthusing and spirit lifting, however, the institution and its 'grinding' ways can/could be wearing for many who don't have the support of family/congregation/Holy Spirit. I'm encouraged that the Church IN Scotland is healthy and growing, however, the Church OF Scotland if it wants to continue needs to be more Christ centred, biblically based and stop trying to be politically correct all the time. Some of its decisions are causing many in ministry to feel despair about the future!! (Female, 60-69)

## **Conclusion**



Quantitative surveys routinely dedicate the back page for participants to offer their own narrative comments on the theme explored by the survey. The aim of the present study was to examine and analyse the comments recorded on the back page of a survey designed for ministers serving in the Church of Scotland on the theme of resilience in ministry. The quantitative survey was completed by 505 ministers of whom 176 offered comments on the back page, which represents one in three participants (35%). The views of these 176 clergy have been analysed and three distinct themes have been reported in this paper. Three conclusions emerge from these data analyses.

The first conclusion is that the clergy themselves took seriously the invitation and the opportunity offered by the back page of the quantitative survey. A third of the clergy (35%) who participated in the survey took additional time to respond to the invitation. Moreover, a number of those who responded to the invitation offered detailed and rich descriptions of their experiences, in some cases attaching additional paper to the questionnaire. Such investment in the survey by the participants needs to be taken seriously by the researchers.

The second conclusion is that the comments afforded rich additional insights into the theme of resilience in ministry among ministers. Resilience is a broad term and clearly there is some overlap with other terms, most notably the concept of burnout. This study examined definitions of resilience, highlighted challenges to resilience, and identified coping strategies and support mechanisms as articulated among ministers affiliated with the Church of Scotland. Findings from these data add to the findings of other studies which suggest a move towards a more personalised approach to resilience that is embedded in context (Ungar, 2005; Southwick et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2016).

The themes identified by the analyses suggest that for the clergy themselves the following issues are salient for informed reflection on resilience. For these clergy resilience is defined in terms of: personality characteristics, an identity which includes a relationship with

Jesus Christ, and the holding of a strong sense of call. In their discussion of challenges to resilience, ministers recognise the need to look at both the work context (the job itself, the resources available and working relationships both locally within congregations and with the wider Church at Presbytery and National level), and at the specific opportunities and challenges posed by the intersection of the demands of the job and the responsibilities of family life combined with their own wellbeing. They also recognise the need to find ways to deal with change within the Church both in terms of theological direction and its changing place and uncertainty in modern society. Support for resilience has been identified as both internal and external. Internal support is located within ministers linked to their own personality or lifestyle choices. External support can be formal in terms of coming from Presbytery, National Church, and from external agencies, or informal in terms of coming from friends, peers, and family. In this way this particular group of ministers experiencing parish ministry within the Church of Scotland reflect the ecological understanding of resilience outlined by Ungar (2005), Masten (2011), and Hart et al. (2016) in that resilience is a balancing act of managing personal expectations of self, alongside the minister's environment including demands from family, expectations from congregation, and expectations from the wider Church.

The third conclusion is that systematic attention given to the comments on the back page may be of proper benefit in shaping future qualitative and quantitative studies both in terms of identifying content related to resilience, and in terms of shaping and structuring analyses of the data.

There are two main weaknesses to this study. First, examination of the content of the shortest responses alongside those of the longest suggests that positive statements were on the whole shorter. The data reported here is limited to those who completed the back page. Those completing this section may have leaned towards those who wanted anonymously to raise

concerns. Ministers in a positive place may have been less inclined to complete this section. Hence, there is a need to correlate these data with the responses from the overall survey.

Second, responses have not been analysed in terms of gender. In light of the literature reviewed by Weaver et al. (2002), in particular the study they highlight by Rayburn, Richards, and Rodgers (1986) there might be value in exploring whether different factors are at work for male and female ministers in terms of defining resilience, in highlighting challenges, and in identifying support mechanisms. Nonetheless, the implications of this study are important for the Church of Scotland in taking seriously the views of its ministers.

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### Weblinks

- <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/resilience> (accessed 30/11/17)
- <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/resilience.html> (accessed 30/11/17)