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ALAN WILSON
**CRUCIBLES OF CHRISTIAN
LEADERSHIP: AN EXPLORATION
OF BENNIS'S AND THOMAS'S
"CRUCIBLE" CONCEPT AS IT
RELATES TO CHRISTIAN LEADERS**

Abstract: Among terms used to describe the events and experiences that contribute to the shaping of leaders is Warren Bennis's and Robert Thomas's "crucibles." Their use of the term emerged from a series of interviews with leaders who referred to a transformative experience that had contributed to their leadership. This paper describes a research project whose aim was to explore the significance of such experiences in the development of Christian leaders. The experiences of fourteen leaders were examined, and analysis of the experiences demonstrated how they had a part to play in shaping both the character and calling of a leader; at times, crucibles functioned as intensified learning experiences in which a leader's beliefs took on an existential intensity. While crucibles may be significant features in the development of a leader, attention must also be paid to other, more incremental, factors.¹

Keywords: *Christian leader, transformative experience, leadership, crucible, resilience, influence, setbacks, paradigm shifts, watershed moment*

Introduction: The Making of a Leader

When it comes to books on leadership, there seems to be no end. The study of leadership is ancient (and complex), yet interest in the subject has surged in recent decades; Banks and Ledbetter (2006) have suggested that "there is arguably a broader and more systematic interest in the topic today than at any time in the past" (loc. 126).

But how do leaders become leaders? A range of terms has been used in literature to describe the events that are believed to contribute to the making of a leader. Badaracco (1997) wrote about "defining moments," whose key elements consisted of revealing, testing, and shaping. Olivares (2011) described "momentous events," "novel, vivid, emotional episodes that disrupt the continuity of daily

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¹This article is based on an earlier paper by the author: (2017). *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 17(2), 47–61.

life.” Horowitz and Van Eeden (2015) chose the term “catalytic moments;” a catalytic experience leads to a reexamination of self-concept, a questioning one’s previously held perceptions of reality.

The term used in this article is “crucible,” drawn from the work of Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas, in their 2002 book entitled *Geeks and Geezers*.² These authors coined the term in what began as a study of how era influences leadership. In the study, Bennis and Thomas interviewed two groups of leaders: one younger (the “Geeks” of the digital era), and one older (the “Geezers” of the analog era). Several era-based distinctions were observed, but Bennis and Thomas found that “every leader in [their] study, young or old, had undergone at least one intense transformational experience” (2002, p. 14). This transformation experience was termed a “crucible.”

According to Merriam Webster, a crucible is “a place or situation in which concentrated forces interact to cause or influence change or development.” Yet in this context, Bennis and Thomas came to define a crucible as “an event or experience that tests and transforms a person” (2010, p. 199), or “a transformative experience from which a person extracts his or her ‘gold:’ a new or altered sense of identity” (Thomas, 2008, p. 5). Crucible experiences vary from person to person; although the term may suggest harshness or adversity (and some of the experiences described as part of this study were notably harsh), Bennis and Thomas suggested that “the crucible need not be a horrendous ordeal” (2002, p. 15). The term, as they saw it, was sufficiently flexible to encompass a range of different individual experiences.

Thomas’s (2008) further work on the theme led him to describe three types of crucible. The first, called “new territory,” often relates to the early stage of a career and involves facing the new and unknown. The second type, referred to as “reversal,” is more often located in the middle of a career and may involve loss or failure. The third, which Thomas called “suspension,” often occurs towards the end of a career. Each of the three crucibles confronts the leader with particular challenges. All test the leader’s resilience; this is what Bennis and Thomas came to describe as “adaptive capacity” (2002, p. 91).

The discussion that follows describes a doctoral research project that aimed to explore the significance of crucible experiences in the specific context of the development of a Christian leader. While work has been done on related themes such as resilience (Forney, 2010), there appears to have been less done on the subject of Christian leadership, or, more specifically, clergy development (McKenna & Yost, 2007).

²The book was later revised and updated and given a new title: *Leading for a Lifetime*. (2007). Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to explore the significance of crucible experiences rather than attempting to measure their frequency; an emphasis on “description, interpretation, and understanding was chosen” (Swinton & Mowat, 2006). Such an approach relies on the value of people’s stories and their validity as a source of knowledge.

The most appropriate qualitative approach was that of hermeneutic phenomenology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), with its emphasis on the interpretation of experience. Smith et al. suggest that the researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic (p. 3), as not only is the participant attempting to interpret his or her experience, but the analyst is also attempting to understand the participant’s interpretation.³ Thus, far from being an impartial or objective observer, the researcher is involved in the construction of the themes that emerge from the research. Drawing on Gadmaer’s work, Swinton and Mowat (2006) argue that these emerging themes “are a constructive product of the fusion of the researcher’s horizons with those of the participants” (loc. 2146).

Interviewing is arguably the most suitable approach in the quest for information that goes beyond mere facts; as Sensing (2011) has noted, interviews allow access to a participant’s inner life in a way that other methods cannot. For this study, a series of semi-structured interviews with a selection of participants were utilized.

The research was conducted with a selection of leaders who self-identified as evangelicals. Fourteen leaders from across the evangelical spectrum agreed to participate.⁴ All but four of them are based in Northern Ireland,⁵ which meant that most of the interviews were carried out face to face. All but two of the participants were male, which is not entirely surprising given the conservative nature of much of the evangelical world in Northern Ireland. The average age of participants was 61, with the youngest in his early forties and the oldest in his mid-seventies. Most of the leaders had been involved in local church leadership, although some had also served in broader, as well as senior, denominational roles. Others were involved in the direction of parachurch organizations. In addition to signing a widely recognized evangelical statement of faith, participants were required to sign a form indicating their consent to being interviewed.

The interviews were semi-structured, one-on-one interviews that lasted between two and a half and three hours. The aim of the interviews was for partic-

³In reality, a triple hermeneutic is at work when the reader in turn attempts to make sense of the researcher’s sense-making (see Smith, p. 109).

⁴Eight of the fourteen are cited in this paper: for details of these participants whose names have been changed to protect their identity, see the note at the end of this article.

⁵One was originally from Northern Ireland but now leads in the Republic of Ireland, one was in England, and the other two were in North America. These four non-Irish participants were interviewed using Skype/FaceTime. Space does not permit a discussion of some of the particularities of Northern Irish Evangelicalism.

ipants to outline their leadership journey and discuss in more detail some of their most formative influences and experiences. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the issues of reliability and validity in qualitative research; however, it should be said that the task of the qualitative researcher is to provide a rich description of the data which contributes to the credibility and resonance of the work (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, loc. 2223). Recording and transcribing interview material contributed to this credibility. It should also be noted that complete accuracy of recall cannot be guaranteed; the passage of time and the participant's implication in the events described mean that memories may be both incomplete and slanted. However, this limitation is mitigated in that the impact of the experiences related has been determined by the meaning the leader attributes to them.

Findings

Following transcription, the data were read, re-read, and subjected to analysis that involved the use of computer software (MAXQDATM) to help with coding. A detailed set of codes was produced, in which just over 200 distinct codes were identified, with forty-nine of them occurring in five or more interviews. Among the most frequent themes were “calling,” marriage/family, God speaking, and prayer. In organizing the material, this researcher chose to borrow from Robert Thomas's three-part classification of crucible experiences: new territory, reversals, and suspension. However, the term “isolation” was used in place of “reversals” for the third category; this is the term that will be used in the discussion that follows.

New Territory

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the evangelical backgrounds of the participants, several of them discussed their experience of conversion (Bebbington, 1989). When conversion takes the form of a dramatic transformational experience, it may be classified as a crucible of sorts, launching the convert into a new life. For several leaders, their conversion had indeed been a dramatic experience. One spoke of becoming “a different person” after his conversion; another said that his conversion (as a twelve-year-old) had been “utterly, completely, and totally life-changing.”

However, not everyone experienced instant, total transformation. “Stuart” described a two-stage conversion: the first stage took place in the setting of a Billy Graham-style mission, which left this leader “on the right side of the track,” what he called “over the line.” However, it was only after several years of drifting that he experienced what he believes to have been his real conversion, which led to a significant reordering of priorities and direction.

Given the way that a conversion experience could lead to a significant life reorientation, it is hardly surprising that for some leaders, the experience of conversion contained within it the seeds of a calling to ministry and leadership. “Ian” expressed it in these terms:

If I were to be really honest, I never was aware of any dramatic call to ordination; but I had a very dramatic conversion. So my conversion and my call are very closely interlinked [. . .] I think, maybe, there was more of a call to ministry involved in than I was actually aware of at the time.

In itself, the experience of entering into leadership may also be a form of crucible. “Shirley” described how her first experience of vocational leadership had not been “the bucket of roses that maybe I’d hoped it would be.” Others experienced a “baptism by fire” and steep learning curves as they began to lead.

Some leaders appear to have always been comfortable with the idea of leadership and have taken to it naturally and with relative ease. For others, it has been more a case of leadership seeking them out, rather than them seeking to lead. Interestingly, not all reluctant leaders were put off by leadership per se; it was rather the idea of being considered as a leader. “Tim” described his resistance to being recognized as a leader and how his resistance was finally broken in a “watershed moment,” as he listened to a speaker at a leadership conference effectively describing his reluctance in remarkably relatable terms. While he had always been happy to lead, the term “leader” put him off. Unfortunately, he had observed poor examples among people who had influenced him. The result of listening to the conference speaker was “Tim” calling his wife and sharing with her, “I think I have finally grasped the reason I was born.”

Once involved in leadership, several leaders discovered themselves at the foot of a steep learning curve, having to “muddle through” or learn by doing. At times, leadership involved moving into “virgin territory,” where the leader was forced to carve things out for him or herself.

“Ian” talked about the way problems energize him: “I’m one of those people who’s always liked a challenge.” He recalled hearing someone talk about “the Popeye Factor.” This is when the leader reaches a point where, like Popeye,⁶ facing the threat of Bluto, finds he “can’t stand n’more!” and has to take action. Sometimes it is dissatisfaction at the status quo that moves a leader to act.

With an average age of 61, many of the research participants had lived through several notable cultural and theological paradigm shifts. These shifts involved issues such as the changing role of women in the church, the understanding and expectation of the work of the Holy Spirit, changing models of

⁶Popeye is the somewhat spindly (that is, until he consumed a can of spinach) cartoon character, who frequently found his affection for Olive Oyl threatened by the villain, Bluto.

church, and issues that were specific to the Irish context during some of the years of “the Troubles.”⁷ Paradigm shifts take leaders out of previous comfort zones, placing them in new territory and often call for courage in leading.

Reversals

A second significant type of crucible was “reversals;” leaders inevitably face challenges and setbacks. Some challenges are intensely personal, while others are more specifically leadership-related. It is not always easy to distinguish between a personal crisis and a leadership crisis, as the sources and implications of the crisis may be both personal and professional.

Among personal crises discussed in the interviews were experiences of loss (more than one leader spoke of the relatively early loss of their father), family crises, and seasons of spiritual crisis. “Graham” referred to family issues in this way:

It is one thing coping with leadership challenges in the church, but there’s a totally different dynamic when it’s a challenge you’re facing in your own family or your marriage. It is of a different dimension altogether. I’ve often said to [my wife], you know I really feel that family [sic] is our Achilles heel.

“Ruth” observed:

I think the times when I have been nearest to walking away from leadership have been family crises [. . .] That impacts your ministry greatly because it’s all-consuming when it’s your family. In those years, there was so much pain that I wondered was I being hypocritical in terms of leading, you know, should you just not stand down and stop?

Several forms of leadership setbacks were discussed. Some leaders described experiences of opposition and conflict. By its nature, leadership is relational; as such, broken relationships can be the source of the most significant amount of pain for some leaders.

For some leaders, dealing with opposition or the experience of having their leadership challenged caused them to reach a deeper level of awareness of God’s call or experience a deeper level in their relationship with Him.

“Stuart,” dealing with the specifically Northern Irish issue of whether his church should permit a demonstration by the Orange Order⁸ at a service, described his conflicts on the issue as “seminal.” While these were difficult times, he found himself “thrown back on God on many occasions.” The conflicts contributed to the crystallizing of his sense of calling and his leadership priori-

⁷“The Troubles” is the term used to describe the violent period between the late 1960s and mid-1990s, during which over 3,600 people were killed and thousands more injured in Northern Ireland.

⁸The Orange Order is a Protestant society that draws its name from the Dutch King, William of Orange; this organization sees its mission as the defense of Protestantism. (For more information, see Mitchel, 2003.)

ties. Such clarity may be regarded as the “gold” he extracted from his crucible. A price had to be paid, but that is what Christian leaders must be prepared to do.

Other leaders experienced crucibles of disappointment and rejection; not every leadership assignment ends well, and a leader may be left with regret. One of the female leaders, “Shirley,” described aspects of the gender crucible she experienced while leading in a male-dominated organization. Remembering this situation, she shared, “It was horrendous; it was horrendous. You were treated like a piece of dirt under their foot.”

Isolation

Both Robert Clinton (1988) and Shelley Trebesch (1997) observed that almost all Christian leaders undergo an isolation experience where they are removed, either voluntarily or involuntarily, from their ministry setting. This author chose to borrow their term (“isolation”) rather than use Thomas’s term, “suspension,” for the third type of crucible. The line between reversals and isolation experiences can be blurred, given that a prolonged setback or reversal can effectively lead to isolation.

One notable example of this was illness. “Shirley” described her experience with illness during a year when “it felt like every bit of scaffolding was knocked away, every inch of it.” The “scaffolding” to which she referred consisted of her sense of call, her love of life and ministry, and the fact that, to some extent, she was what she did. One might argue about the health or otherwise of this last element, but leaders find that what they do is integral to who they are. “Shirley” referred to her illness as a “dark night of the soul;” however, despite this difficulty, she has been able to trace some good:

I realize the only reason I can do what I do today is because God allowed me to go to the darkest place, and in that darkest place revealed Himself to me. And only in that dark place was He able to do a work in me that’s allowing me to be effective.

“Vic” also spoke of a dark night of the soul, although he used the term slightly differently, describing a theological dark night of the soul. This was a crisis of faith, “almost like a theological wilderness.” The outcome for him was a greater grasp of God.

Moving on from a leadership role can be its own kind of crucible. This may be a result of a transition when a degree of status that has gone with a previous position is left behind, or it may be the crucible of retirement. “Stuart,” the oldest of the leaders in the research, described the abruptness of a retirement that meant moving away from a congregation he had led for over twenty years. Also, he noted that he felt a bit “stranded” and was unsure whether he was “finishing well.” He said that it is “because I’ve become redundant, and

that's been self-imposed." Another retired leader, "Vic," spoke of the pain of retirement: "I suppose—and this is why retirement is quite painful sometimes—I just loved to be the minister of that church. I just loved those people; I loved the excitement of preaching."

Discussion

Reporting the interview has begun to hint at some of the significance of crucible experiences. For some leaders, the crucible experience is part of being shaped for future ministry, as in the "dark night of the soul" episodes mentioned above. More broadly, their significance may be summed up in a way that is perhaps unremarkable, but which nonetheless opens an opportunity for reflection. Namely, these experiences are significant in terms of four issues: their impact on who the leader is (character), how the leader relates to God (spirituality), what the leader does (calling), and in terms of what one participant referred to as "existential intensity."

Character

As McNeal has observed, leaders and their characters are "shaped over time" (2009, p. 6). The crucible, be it illness or opposition, may serve to highlight character issues to which the leader needs to pay attention. One leader's story illustrated the fact that unresolved character issues may be apparent even in the positive experience of ministry success, although there is a danger that such success may mask more profound issues. In this case, while his public ministry was flourishing, his family was suffering.

God had given me quite extraordinary gifts as a preacher, as a minister, as a person who could relate to people and, you know, a comedian and the whole works. A package. I had these gifts but not the maturity; I had not the spiritual maturity. I didn't even think, now looking back, I had even the social, personal maturity even though that was not the impression that was being created. And therefore, wilderness was necessary for me. (Vic)

There is wide agreement about the importance of a Christian leader's character. It should be noted that in both Old and New Testaments, leaders were warned about character issues. Nonetheless, both biblical and empirical evidence suggests that we should not be surprised at leaders' shortcomings. Indeed, success and failure co-exist. Bill George has observed that many leaders get derailed during their leadership journey (2007, p. 27), not that they are necessarily bad leaders, but they get caught up in their success. Biblically, one thinks of the pride of Hezekiah and his eagerness to display his wealth to Jerusalem's future nemesis, Babylon.

There is much biblical evidence to suggest that a leadership journey will often feature tests of character. Both adversity and prosperity have the potential to reveal character issues that the leader will need to address.

Spirituality

A related aspect of a leader's life is the leader's relationship with God. Crucible experiences appear to influence this in several ways, including the cultivation of a greater awareness of God's character, a deeper sense of being loved by God, and a higher degree of trust in God. A previous section referred to "Vic" having to navigate a "theological dark night of the soul." The experience led him to see God in a new way.

For me this was a move from my theological adolescence, where my theology and my ability to articulate my theology was the most important thing, [to] where to see Him as more wonderful than I could ever say [. . .] it was just so liberating. (Vic)

Several leaders described significant experiences through which they became more personally aware of God's love. The most dramatic story took place at a charismatic conference where "Stuart" had gone at a time of particular difficulty during his ministry. He recalled what he perceived to be a remarkable encounter with God ("I was out of circulation for about forty-five minutes") in which he heard an audible voice and received an overwhelming assurance of God's love. When speaking of this experience, he remarked, "If ever there was a life-changing thing, that was it."

Such an account raises apparent questions of validity and indeed theology,⁹ questions that are beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁰ What must not be overlooked in these discussions, however, is that one crucial aspect of the function of crucible experiences appears to be the leader's increased awareness of God's love. One thinks of Paul's prayer for his Ephesian readers to know the love of Christ, something that "cannot be merely an intellectual exercise" (Carson, 1992, p. 191). Perhaps there are times when the crucible functions as an accelerated learning opportunity, even a shortcut, to new spiritual awareness.

Similarly, some leaders spoke about their growing trust in God; the leadership journey had been a journey of learning to trust God more. One commented, "God has inculcated into me something that is a gift of Him, and that is a capacity to know that He will not fail me and that I can trust Him." A leader's (or anyone's) faith may be both tested and strengthened through crucible experiences.

⁹The particular experience referred to here sits in the context of the phenomenon of the Toronto Blessing, a phenomenon that caused considerable debate and controversy in the 1990s.

¹⁰It should be said that from the perspective of interpretive phenomenology, the experiences, and the meaning attached to them by the participants, are what they are. Additionally, consideration must also be given to practical theology's questions on the validity of experience as a source of truth.

Christian leadership is arguably inseparable from ongoing Christian discipleship; it can be challenging to talk about a leadership journey as though it were separate from the rest of life. Such a view is not unique to Christian leadership; Warren Bennis (1989) observed that “for the leader, as for any integrated person, life itself is the career” (p. 4). In Christian terms, the leader remains a follower. One leader observed that, even though leaders are called to be shepherds, “one of the big mistakes some of us make as leaders is we’ve forgotten we are still sheep.” Sometimes it is a crucible experience that serves to remind the leader of this; the cumulative effect of a lifetime of crucible experiences can shape a leader’s expectations of what it means to follow God.

Calling

Guinness (2003, p. 48) has sought to distinguish between an ordinary calling, by which he means that “no follower of Christ is without a calling,” since all are called to follow God, and a later “special” calling, by which he is referring to the “tasks and missions laid on individuals through a direct, specific, supernatural communication from God.” All of the leaders in the research referred to some special calling or the way they believe they have been led to specific leadership situations.

At times, the call itself can be a form of crucible experience. We have already reviewed the possibility that a conversion experience may contain the seeds of calling, but there are also times when a leader senses a specific challenge to accept a leadership role. For example, more than one leader recalled formative moments as they listened to speakers at large gatherings.

Beyond this, the crucible was sometimes associated with the testing of the call. This appeared to work in two ways: a crucible experience may test the depth of reality of the call, but a strong sense of call may be part of what enables a leader to persevere through a crucible experience. “Shirley” observed that she could not have persisted in her role in the face of opposition, had she not been “absolutely rock solid about the call.”

In reflecting on leaders’ experiences of call, it should be noted that many evangelicals subscribe to a particular view of such an experience and—in the broader sense—the experience of being guided by God. This view is predicated on the idea that one aspect of the will of God is that He has a specific plan for each individual. Christians who are keen to discover God’s plan for their lives are encouraged to be sensitive to ways in which God may be directing them towards His plan. At least part of this view appears to rest on dubious exegetical foundations. For example, the “peace of Christ,” which is to rule in a Christian’s heart (Col. 3:15) is sometimes understood to be a form of inner peace that ought to be present when discerning God’s call. However, the term is more likely to refer to

corporate harmony within a church than to a sense of psychological wellbeing. It is also unclear if the narratives of Isaiah or Saul/Paul were intended as normative templates, or that the Spirit's interventions in Acts are any more than occasional, strategic interventions.

Nonetheless, the experiences of several of the leaders in this study appear to validate the subjective nature of their call experience. While it has been argued that a sense of call "which was dubious scripturally and is highly subjective at best, lacks sufficient weight to function as the ultimate anchor in the heavy seas of ministry" (Friesen, 1980, p. 320), several of the leaders interviewed had found the subjective experience of a call to be an essential source of confidence in their ministry. The longevity and apparent success of many of the participants' leadership make it difficult to discount their experience.

Perhaps there is a counter to the potential for the excessive individualism that can be encouraged by a traditional evangelical view; two senior leaders in this study suggested that there needs to be a more significant role for the church in seeking to discern an individual's call.

"Existential Intensity"

One final result of crucibles relates to, as one leader described it, "existential intensity." At times, a painful crucible experience results in a leader needing to draw a line in the sand in terms of a defining mark of his or her leadership; this defining mark may be a familiar idea that has taken on an "existential intensity" because of the pain of the crucible.

In the example mentioned earlier of "Stuart" and the opposition he faced from the Orange Order, it was the crucible of conflict that helped determine the extent to which his understanding of the gospel would define his leadership. Another leader, "Simon," reflected on how his experience of what he perceived to be harsh and abusive treatment at the hands of a church had given an "existential intensity" to the view that the church should be living proof of the gospel. He said, "If you have gospel doctrine on paper, but you don't have gospel culture in relationships, you don't really have gospel doctrine." He now sees his primary leadership responsibility as safeguarding such an ethos within the church he now leads. He believes he would not be the pastor he is today had he not encountered the pain of his crucible.

Other Factors

It should be noted that crucibles do not always tell the whole story. In a critical review of *Geeks and Geezers*, Robert Allio (2003) suggested that a crockpot

¹¹Allio himself clarified this point in a personal email to me on January 23, 2015.

might be a more fitting metaphor for the process of a leader's development."¹¹ Similarly, more recent research by Paterson and Delight (2014), while partially supporting Robert Thomas's work, also found evidence of the part played by other learning experiences "more akin to a gradual evolution."

In the current research, it was apparent that other factors were involved in the development of a leader. Of particular significance was the role of mentors and other influencers. For some leaders, this influence came from their father. Others spoke about youth leaders who impressed as much by their consistency of character as by anything they said. Sometimes mentors, like Jethro in the story of Moses, contributed advice in specific circumstances, either encouraging or challenging. No doubt certain specific interventions on the part of a mentor could be classified as crucible experiences (Bennis and Thomas include mentoring relationships within their definition), but often their influence is gradual and incremental.

Limitations and Scope for Further Work

The focus of this study was on the *significance* of crucible experiences and not on their *frequency*. While no attempt was made to measure the latter, the quality of the study would have been improved had the qualitative approach been preceded by some basic quantitative research. This may have helped distinguish between leaders who have experienced crucibles from those who have not.

Secondly, the research was limited to those who self-identified as evangelical. A comparison of evangelical and non-evangelical leadership journeys and crucibles might help determine whether some experiences are more likely, depending on one's theological position. For example, how would a non-evangelical's experience of call compare with that of an evangelical? Given the place accorded to conversionism in evangelical thinking, or the emphasis on the call in some circles, were the cards somewhat stacked in advance of the research?

Third, more could be done to develop a discussion of how leaders navigated their crucible experiences. This discussion could have included questions such as: How much did Bible reading play a part? What about the encouraging influence of friends?

Fourth, this study focused on leaders who have stood the test of time—indeed some would be regarded by their peers as having attained a considerable degree of success. Another area of inquiry would be to involve those leaders who have been derailed by their crucibles; an unfortunate fact is that not all leadership journeys end well. Why do some leaders successfully navigate their crucibles, while the same experiences spoil others?

Each of these limitations in the present research could result in further

work. Similarly, there would be scope to work with higher numbers of female leaders, focusing the question: Are the crucible experiences of female leaders markedly different from those of male leaders? It would also be useful to explore the relationship between personality types and degrees of resilience in navigating a crucible.

Implications and Possible Benefits

Implicit in the discussion is the importance of who the leader is and the fact that leadership is not merely something that a leader learns to do. While as much as possible should be done to ensure that leaders are equipped with the tools needed to lead, this should not be allowed to take the place of encouraging leaders to develop both their character and their relationship with God. This provides possible food for thought for institutions seeking to equip future pastoral leaders.

As well as some benefits of the interview process to individual participants (one commented on the value of being “heard”), subsequent interest in the research has resulted in this author’s participation in several leaders’ events; these experiences have demonstrated the value of leaders being able to learn from other leaders’ experiences. Further work remains to be done in developing tools that might help leaders to “read” their own leadership journey, whether alone, in groups, or in a mentoring relationship.

Conclusion

As noted earlier in this paper, Bennis and Thomas acknowledged the flexibility of the term “crucible.” While this flexibility allows for a significant degree of individuality in terms of crucible experiences, the difficulty with elasticity is that the term can become meaningless; after all, if everything can be a crucible, is anything really a crucible? One might arguably wish to exclude experiences that lack harshness. However, the significant element of a crucible is that it functions as a defining moment in which a leader’s identity and leadership are shaped.

Crucible experiences, then, may be understood as intense, transformative experiences that contribute to the shaping of a leader. These experiences often play an essential part both in who the leader is and in the leader’s calling. At times they are painful or may call for courageous leadership. In some sense, they function as intensive learning opportunities where leaders learn about themselves, God, and their own leadership.

Finally, even if crucibles do not tell the whole story of a leader’s development, the concept that Bennis and Thomas have portrayed provides a worthwhile contribution to the task of understanding a leadership journey.

Author's note on the participants cited:

- 1) Ian, a senior denominational leader;
- 2) Graham, a senior mission leader with experience as a local pastor and denominational leadership;
- 3) Ruth, with her husband, a “pastor emeritus” of an Irish church that had developed under her and her husband's leadership;
- 4) Shirley, founder of a new parachurch ministry;
- 5) Vic, a retired local pastor;
- 6) Stuart, a retired local pastor;
- 7) Simon, a pastor of a local church; and
- 8) Tim, a leader in a global organization.

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