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## Experiencing a Call to Ministry: Changing Trajectories, Re-Structuring Life Stories

**Abstract** This paper presents a qualitative analysis of women's experiences of *call* to Christian pastoral ministry as a second career—a mid-life turning point. Drawing on 44 semi-structured interviews with pastors of different denominations, I look at women's stories of call through the lens of interpretive theory to analyze how women create meanings around this life altering event, and how they construct past experiences in light of these decisions. I employ George Herbert Mead's theory of time to analyze how women afford prior secular work experiences sacred meaning in light of their subsequent "pastoral call" experience. This paper attempts to arrive at a better understanding of women's experience of entering pastoral ministry, as well as their past and future life trajectories.

**Keywords** Identity; Narrative Work; Turning Points; Christian Ministry; Gender

"So... what brought you to the place where you wanted to do ministry, even at the very beginning?" It is a warm August morning and I am sitting with Reverent Shirley in a pair of rocking chairs next to the window

in her open concept living room. A small table between us holds a tray with coffee and banana muffins she had made for me, and I gratefully nibble and sip as we talk. It is early in our conversation when I ask Shirley the question about where her desire to become a pastor came from, and her answer takes us back in time several years to her college days of majoring in English and tracking towards a career in journalism. One day before class, a colleague's remark that she would "never make it" in that world changed everything, setting her off on a journey of self-exploration and seeking (as she describes it) after "God's will" for her life in the direction of ministry leadership.

I ask this same question—describe what led you to become a pastor—to Janice in her church office, and am transported into stories from her childhood

and teenage years growing up participating in the church and helping to lead. Pauline takes me to her twenties and her aspirations to become a missionary; Heidi takes me to her childhood home and to memories of her atheist father singing in a church choir and reading to her from literary classics—poets and theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and John Donne; Patty takes me to her room kneeling at her bed at the age of six on the Saturday night when, she explains, she first "gave her heart to Jesus." Asking a female pastor<sup>1</sup> how she came to this profession is asking for the story of her life.

Traditionally, pastors enter their roles through a lengthy schooling, internship, and affirmation process involving the larger denomination they are affiliated with (i.e., Baptist, United Church, etc.) and their own church congregation. These regulatory bodies test and, through pastoral ordination, confirm and legitimize a candidate's suitability for church leadership (Oden 1987; Christopherson 1994). Until recently, this affirmation process was available to men only; however, over the past 50 years, careers in Christian ministry have become a realistic possibility for *women* as well as men in several denominations (Adams 2007). In light of their relatively recent inclusion in the field of pastoral ministry, I set out in my research to discover how women get into this career. Many of my participants were among the first women ordained in their denominations, and I wanted to understand what had attracted them to this role. On the cusp of major institutional changes

in the church, how did they choose to become pastors and how did this decision affect them?

Listening to their stories, I discovered that, for most of the women, the desire to serve God started early in their lives, but that with limited opportunities and so few role models to follow, they typically pursued other careers. Thus, for most of them, Christian ministry was a *second career*; before becoming a pastor, they were full-time mothers, social workers, teachers, administrators, businesswomen, retail workers, or any other manner of professional. I discovered as well that, while the paths that led them to Christian ministry were diverse, the decision typically involved great sacrifices—sacrifices they felt compelled to make in light of what they experienced as an irresistible "call" from God. In addition to the life changes that responding to these calls involved, the women also found themselves reassessing who they were, what their past experiences had been about, and who they were meant to be. In other words, responding to a call involved re-storying their lives.

My aim in this paper is to explore more deeply how women who have made the decision to enter Christian ministry experience what they define as "the call" and the routes their career transitions take. I am also interested in the identity-related implications of their decisions and in the transitions that they experience in connection with how they define themselves and come to understand their biographical trajectories. This paper contributes to a relatively sparse sociological literature on the new roles that women are assuming in Christian churches, particularly in relation to the lived experiences of these

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<sup>1</sup> The label "pastor" will be used throughout this paper to describe ordained or "called" Christian church leaders. Different denominations use different titles, but the title of "pastor" will be used throughout to refer to all priests, ministers, etc.

women. Theoretically, the paper is informed by, and contributes to, symbolic interactionist discussions of turning points in the lives of social actors and their impact on definitions of self. I begin, therefore, by discussing the substantive literature in this area, as well as the more theoretical literature that I am using conceptually to frame the paper's questions. This is followed by a discussion of the methods I used in conducting this qualitative study of women in Christian ministry. The findings section of the paper is divided into two parts. In the first, I discuss the ways women describe and experience the transition into Christian ministry. In the second, I discuss the way past life events and careers acquire new meanings in light of this significant mid-life transition. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

### Women and the "Call" to Christian Ministry

The entrance of women into pastoral ministry has garnered significant scholarly attention. Most of the literature in this area, however, examines the historical changes in the church with respect to the inclusion of women (Chaves 1996; Chang 1997; Lummis and Nesbitt 2000; Adams 2007). For example, Chaves' (1996:842) survey of Christian churches established that "in 1890, about 7% of U.S. denominations gave full clergy rights to women; today, approximately half of U.S. denominations do so." That percentage has probably grown even more since the study was published.<sup>2</sup> Chaves concludes that the

<sup>2</sup> More recent data and Canadian numbers or representations of female clergy members do not appear to be published. Adams (2007) reports that the census bureau states that 85.7% of all

entrance of women into leadership and clergy positions is one of the most salient transformations in religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He attributes this historical change largely to the external pressures that the church has faced from secular institutions to abandon conservative practices and become more inclusive (Chaves 1996).

The literature also addresses the inequalities that women who seek positions of leadership in the church continue to face, arguing that gendered inequalities are still written into the fabric of most religious institutions. Stewart-Thomas (2010) contends that even as more denominations are accepting of female pastors, congregations themselves continue to be gendered organizations and place similarly gendered expectations on their pastors. Her study<sup>3</sup> concludes that female pastors are often stereotyped in particularly gendered ways and expected to perform more emotional labor, like community service and care-giving. This suggests that even in those churches that have opened their doors to female ministers, barriers to their full participation in ministry leadership still exist.

The concept of a "stained glass ceiling" has been used to describe the subtler barriers to career advancement for female clergy (Sullins 2000; Adams 2007). Sullins' (2000) study<sup>4</sup> of female clergy in the Episcopal church concludes that there is a disparity between the church's rhetoric of acceptance and the actual practices and opportunities afforded to

American clergy were men in 1996—suggesting it is still a gendered profession. Canadian numbers are not often reported in studies in this area.

<sup>3</sup> Data drawn from the 1998 National Congregations Study.

<sup>4</sup> Data drawn from the Episcopal Clerical Directory for 1999.

female pastors. He discovered that a higher percentage of female pastors still hold lower prestige positions than their male counterparts. While only 11% of ordained men held subordinate positions (like associate pastor, children's pastor, etc.), 32.5% of ordained women were in such positions. Sullins attributes this persistent, gendered inequality to unchanging cultural values operating within individual congregations, as opposed to denominational restrictions. Adams (2007) too uses the notion of a "stained glass ceiling" to describe his findings in a study on church practices of "symbolic conservatism."<sup>5</sup> He concludes that female pastors are blocked from participating at the highest levels of church leadership and, that within some congregations, the stained glass ceiling is intended to be visible. Women's exclusion thus becomes a symbol of the institution's conservatism and their differentiation from secular norms and institutions.

There has been relatively little research on the perspectives of women themselves or on how they experience their ministries. More specifically, little attention has been paid to how women transition into such pastoral positions in the first place or what draws them to this profession. While there have been numerous studies on the concept of "call"—the impulse to become a pastor—most of this literature is theological in nature (Oden 1987; Christopherson 1994; George 2005; Bond 2012; Duffy and Dik 2013). Pitt (2012), however, offers an insightful exception. Pitt conducted a sociological analysis of call experiences among black Pentecostal pastors. Interviewing 75 female and 38 male pastors, he asked: "Would

<sup>5</sup> Data drawn from the National Congregations Study and the 1998 General Social Survey.

you tell me about your call?" (Pitt 2012:13). He suggests that the legitimacy of his participants' pastoral identity is greatly increased by their ability to relay a conventional call story—and that each participant could readily provide a description of their own experience of call. Pitt discovered that "callees" (as he labeled his participants) experience both "vertical" (from God) and "horizontal" (from family members and friends) affirmations that they should enter pastoral ministry. In this way, he points to the call to ministry as a socially constructed phenomenon, and goes on to demonstrate how the actual *experience* of call can be broken down into two varieties: a "blitzkrieg" (Pitt 2012:47) call, experienced as a lightning-like, surprising supernatural intervention that interrupts one's normal life to redirect it, or a more "ordinary call" (Pitt 2012:46), that takes the form of a gradual realization and transition into a pastoral role.

Focusing specifically on women clergy, Zikmund, Adair, and Chang (1998) studied women in approximately 19 main-line denominations and include in their analysis a chapter on the pastoral call to ministry. These researchers conclude that many female pastors come to this profession later in life, as second career. The significance of this is that women enter ministry with a different set of life experiences to offer than men, but the impact of this difference on their ministry has yet to be fully explored.

While Pitt (2012) and Zikmund and colleagues (1998) pay close attention to women and men's experiences of being called into ministry, gaps in this literature remain. Pitt's sample draws from only one denomination; as it happens this denomination does not

*fully* ordain women to all responsibilities of pastoral leadership. Women in Pitt's sample are still barred from administering communion and marrying couples and have limited or otherwise labeled "preaching" opportunities. Also, Pitt's pastors were all still involved in their secular vocations, not having fully abandoned their "day jobs" to pursue a career within the church. Zikmund and colleagues (1998) devote only a small portion of their study to women's call experiences and do not elaborate on how these might impact identity or life trajectories after the time of the call. My research broadens Pitt and Zikmund and colleagues' contributions in two senses. First, I analyze the call stories of *fully* ordained women who *fully* transition out of their secular careers to become pastors. Second, I look beyond the call experiences themselves to analyze how being called leads women to look back on and reconstruct their lives and biographical trajectories.

### Symbolic Interactionism and Adult Life Transitions

The questions I am raising in this paper are rooted in a symbolic interactionist perspective. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective concerned with the ways in which social actors construct meanings. A fundamental premise of the perspective is that, through their interactions with each other, human beings engage in defining objects, situations, and people, and that these definitions then become the context for their actions.

A central concern of symbolic interactionism is how social actors construct meanings about *themselves* as objects—thereby constructing a sense of self and

identity (Cooley 1922; Mead 1934; Goffman 1958; Stone 1990; Prus 1996; 1997; Doucet 2008; Dunn and Creek 2015). Many symbolic interactionists have written about identity—how identities are acquired, managed, negotiated, changed, and shed. Particularly germane to this discussion are those who have explored the connections between identity and narratives.

Somers (1994), for example, talks about identities being socially constructed through the narratives we tell about ourselves. She is interested in identity formation as narrative accomplishment, as opposed to a direct reflection of the various statuses one holds (i.e., gender, age, race, religion). "Social life is itself storied," she posits, "and that narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*" (Somers 1994:613-614). Somers (1994:618) identifies four "dimensions of narrativity"—ontological, public, conceptual, and metanarratives—but it is the ontological dimension that addresses the questions most relevant to this paper. Ontological narratives are intersubjectively constructed stories that "are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to do" (Somers 1994:618). Ontologically speaking, identities are formed through the stories people tell to themselves and others, and one's position within these narratives can shape how one behaves. Stories are told to create meanings for the actions of others, to explain one's own actions, and in an attempt to predict actions in advance. Somers (1994) argues that humans seek to maintain and act out stories of stability and coherence, plotting their biographies together in a coherent manner for the benefit of both themselves and others. Somers' work raises questions about how people achieve narrative coherence

in the stories they tell, particularly when they undergo significant transitions in their lives.

Strauss (1959) suggests that distinctive moments, or "turning points" are an unavoidable part of adult life. Events happen that lead individuals to realize that they have changed; they are no longer who they once were. Turning points are usually accompanied by feelings of surprise, anxiety, and tension as a new role and a new self is tested out and explored. Although transitions may occur gradually, when a life changing event (like a call to ministry) occurs, this comes to be seen as a milestone, and such "recognition then necessitates new stances, new alignments" (Strauss 1959:93).

Strauss' idea of adult mid-life transitions has been taken up by others, who have elaborated on how these transitions occur in relation to particular roles. Rose (1988) analyzes the steps that individuals go through in becoming an "ex" in relation to a variety of different professions and identities—ex-nuns, ex-spouses, ex-military, ex-teachers, et cetera. Van den Hoonaard (2001) draws attention to the moment widows realize their identities have changed. She suggests there comes a time when each widow experiences an "identifying moment" (van den Hoonaard 2001:38)—an instance when something happens and it becomes real to them, solidified, that they are now a widow instead of a "wife" or married person; their identity has changed.

Another theme in symbolic interactionism that I draw on in my analysis has to do with how social actors make sense of time and biographic trajectories. This line of inquiry has its origins in the work

of one of the perspective's founders, George Herbert Mead. Mead (1929) developed a theory about the temporality of human experience which some sociologists (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983) have argued has yet to be fully exploited in empirical studies. Mead's theory of time centers on his concept of the "specious present"—the idea that lived experience occurs only in the present. Past and future do not have an objective existence as independent entities; rather, they exist only through how they are experienced in the present. Using their current vantage point, social actors understand both past and future through the lens the present offers. This means, of course, that these understandings are continuously changing as individuals move through the trajectory of their lives (Mead 1929). Moreover, for Mead, these understandings are fundamentally social in nature—they are intersubjectively created and expressed. Mead (1929:236) also draws attention to the notion of "continuity" and "dislocation" (discontinuity), pointing out that the interjection of discontinuity into one's present position, created by unexpected experiences, allows the "past" to be distinguishable from the "present."

Maines and colleagues (1983:163) clarify a number of elements in Mead's theory, including the idea of the "symbolically reconstructed past," most relevant for the current analysis. Mead (1929) argued that "the past is overflow of the present." According to Maines and colleagues (1983:163), Mead was suggesting that "the symbolic reconstruction of the past...involves redefining the meaning of past events in such a way that they have meaning and utility for the present." Again, we see in Mead's work, as in Somers' (1994), the underlying premise that humans pragmatically

orient themselves towards creating and maintaining coherence and meaning, but within some sort of temporal, tangible “present” framework and position. The question remains—how is this agential narrative work practically accomplished in everyday life?

These are the threads I draw on in symbolic interactionist theorizing to conceptualize the movement of women’s biographical trajectories into Christian ministry as a series of continuities or discontinuities through their life-course. An identifiable moment of change or discontinuity generates dilemmas about what course to take, as well as questions about who we are or want to become. Such moments can also prompt reflection on the meanings of experiences (Somers 1994), and, as Mead (1929) suggests, a reinterpretation of the past. In the findings section of my paper, I show how these processes unfolded in the everyday life experiences of the women I interviewed for this study.

## Data & Methods

I collected the data for this project by conducting a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with 44 female ministers across Canada. Pastors ranged in age from 19 to 78. Their family situations ran the gamut from heterosexual marriages to single, divorced, and never married; some participants had parented (or were parenting) children either on their own or with a heterosexual partner, while others were childless. I interviewed pastors from seven different denominations, including Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Free Methodist, United Church, Congregational Christian Church, Mennonite, and

a few who identified as interdenominational. The majority of participants (31 out of 44) identified with Presbyterian, Anglican, or Baptist traditions.

The interviews ranged in length from about 30 minutes to just over two hours. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The majority of the interviews took place face-to-face, in either the participant’s church office or home, or my own. Some interviews were conducted over Skype, and two were conducted over the phone. Each conversation began with a discussion of the demographic characteristics of the participants and their current church communities. Participants were then simply asked to explain what led them to become pastors, and what the experience has been like for them. For confidentiality reasons, the names of the churches and the denominational affiliations of the participants have been omitted and all participants have been given pseudonyms.

The interview data have been collected and analyzed using a grounded theory approach, as derived from symbolic interactionist premises about the nature of human group life and behavior. I have relied on Charmaz’s (2014) approach which emphasizes participants’ perspectives, but also urges researchers to problematize their own taken-for-granted knowledge in the search for intersubjectivity with participants.

More specifically, I looked for themes in the data and coded while in the field interviewing, through a process of iteratively listening to, reading, and re-reading the data, making note of recurring themes or points of discussion in responses that continued to

emerge. This, in turn, shaped the questions I asked new participants as the interviews continued, until a point of saturation was reached. The theme of being “called” to ministry emerged early on, leading me to quickly catch on to the fact that asking about this experience at the outset of an interview led inevitably to lengthy, detailed, and rich responses.

## Calls to Ministry

### Starting Points

In her analysis of how individuals shed old identities and take on the identity of an “ex,” Rose (1988) observes that there can be a time before actually physically leaving a role when movement in that direction has already begun in one’s mind. So it was for the participants in this study. The path into Christian ministry began for all of the women with an inciting incident or experience which prompted a mental re-assessment of their current trajectory and the consideration of alternatives. Each of the women could identify a memorable moment, day, or period of realization that marked the point that started their journey towards Christian ministry. They describe these turning points as *sacred* in the sense that they experienced them as God reaching out to them—directly, vividly, undeniably—to communicate a plan for their lives in his service. This description of the turning points, in essence, captures how the women understood what it means to “be called” or to experience “a call.” For example, Selah recalled the moment when she made her decision to become a pastor in the finest detail and with great clarity, imbuing the day’s otherwise mundane occurrences with a sacred significance:

Sunday afternoon the boys were outdoors playing...I went home, my husband was in the living room—some things you always remember—Sunday afternoon, boys outside, went in, sat down on the chesterfield next to [my husband] and said, “I was down talking to Reverent C”—and he [the husband] said, “You’re going to get ordained.” We’d *never* had those words between us. And I said...“We can’t afford it.” And he said, “We’ll sell the house if we have to,” because we owned our own home. So that’s where it started.

Selah’s statement “some things you always remember” captures the women’s experiences aptly. All of the participants had the common experience of feeling “called” and looking back on these pivotal moments with reverential nostalgia. At the same time, their stories of call took on different forms. The calls came to them in different ways, and while some acted on the impulse immediately, others took months or even years to make a move. In the next section of my paper, I describe three different forms of call stories: “sudden revelations,” “mounting dissatisfaction,” and “anomie” call stories.

### “Sudden Revelations”

“You wanna make God smile, tell him your plans,” said Dana. This was her way of introducing the story of her mid-life transition from teacher and department head to pastor and national leader in her denomination. For Dana, the call to ministry came as a complete surprise, as she had spent decades establishing herself as an educator. She and others talked about having their lives carefully

charted only to find themselves at a crossroad, being pushed in a different direction by God. While the meanings they attach to these moments are redefined after they make the decision to enter Christian ministry, some of the women admit to being not only surprised but unsettled, and perhaps even annoyed at the time. In the moment, they may experience these calls in terms of God “upsetting their plans.” After all, to act on God’s call means abandoning whatever career trajectory they had plotted out for themselves and dramatically changing course. These sorts of experiences are akin to what Pitt (2012) calls the “blitzkrieg” call, in which the message from God comes out of nowhere, producing a sense of shock and awe. Little wonder, then, that these sudden experiences of call are fraught with anxiety and angst as women wrestle with questions of whether they are suited for the pastoral role, especially in those denominations where the role is still relatively new, and whether they are willing to make the changes required of them and their families.

Lucy’s story provides an apt example of how dramatically call stories may be experienced. She, like many other participants, suggested her call story was atypical because she had already found her “dream career” before being called:

I don’t know that my story is terribly typical because I actually had my life charted out. I had done a master of applied science at McGill in speech and language pathology and so I, you know, pretty much had decided and, in fact, had worked in that field for 11 years, and I loved my work in that field, so I really figured that I had my life stream pretty set.

Lucy experienced her call at the end of what she described as a “very typical Sunday [church] service.” She was quick to point out that she is not someone who is “given to religious experiences” like hearing an audible message from God, so she was taken aback by what happened to her:

There was nothing particularly special or interesting about the service that I remember. If anything I remember it being a little bit harried, uh, getting our three kids ready for church and there and, um, it was...like this was a really weird thing for me, very much out of the ordinary. It was really an experience that I can only describe as having a sense that all of a sudden I was really actually in God’s presence and he was saying to me, “Here’s what you’re gonna do.”

Lucy was not unhappy with her current situation or thinking about making changes in her life, which, according to Rose (1988), often characterizes the early stages of career or role transitions. Nor was she undergoing a period of soul-searching. From her perspective, her life was well on track when she found herself on the receiving end of an abrupt, direct, and unsolicited message from God, asking her to do something that did not seem to make any sense to her at first:

I didn’t really have any idea how this [becoming a pastor] would happen, it didn’t seem probable to me. And my husband and I had pretty much got our lives—he was an audiologist, so our two careers were very much in sync. We had just built our dream home, you know, we had a young family at that point so it was, it didn’t look very likely, and so I really didn’t know what to think of this experience.

Reluctant to move and uproot her family, Lucy put her call experience “on the back burner” for two years. Then, one day, her husband handed her calendars for a theological college and suggested she apply. She describes no longer wanting to avoid what she had come to see as inevitable. She applied, doors opened, and “we just kind of decided to take the leap, and, yeah, the rest is history,” she says. For Lucy, God’s call represented a surprising and unwelcomed invitation when it first came. But, the experience planted a seed, a process of imagining what responding to the call would mean in both practical and spiritual terms, and eventually steps in the direction of turning call into action.

Shira shared a similar story. As a woman in a denomination where female leadership is still contested territory, she did not initially see pastoral ministry as a possibility. Shira went into social work, and was busy building her career and a life with her family when she experienced what she describes as a direct intervention from God while performing a mundane daily activity:

One day, I was walking my younger son back from having dropped my older son off to nursery school, and this is the word, like God like, the voice came—the only time in my life—and it said, “You will work for me.”

Shira had just accepted a promotion at the time and was one week away from starting her new position, but she decided instead to resign and take on a pastoral position immediately: “As opposed to a raise and a promotion I would come into this [pastoral] position and know that I would never move up in

anything else. But, I knew beyond...I knew that this was what I had to do. So here I am.”

Lucy waited two years before acting on her call experience, while Shira acted immediately. These differing responses highlight the fact that while the women may not experience the call as something they initiated or have any control over, they do exercise agency in deciding how they will respond and in working out for themselves what these calls mean in terms of re-orienting their lives. In fact, from the women’s perspective, there is an interaction that occurs between themselves and God, with God communicating—sometimes in a voice that they hear in a literal sense—his desire to see them working in his service, and waiting for their response.

The notion of God acquiring a real and active presence in individuals’ lives in a way that allows interaction is consistent with other studies that have looked at the experiential aspects of spirituality. Pitt (2012), in his study of black Pentecostal pastors’ calls to ministry, supports the assertion that religious people’s interactions with a “divine other”—whether it be imaginary or real—certainly do have *real* implications for their social behavior. As a researcher, he operates within the premise that “God is a person with whom they [his participants] can, should and do interact” (Pitt 2012:4). In her study of an evangelical Christian church called the Vineyard, Luhrmann (2012) observed how the community of believers who make up the church explicitly cultivate the skill of communicating with God (commonly called “praying”), changing, in the process, their neural pathways in just the same way as interactions with other individuals would. She,

like Pitt (2012), concludes that Christians' vertical relationship with their spiritual God parallels their horizontal relationships with family and friends and is just as real for them. The dimensions of this interaction are reflected in the ways Christians personify God in terms that emphasize how he is to be experienced relationally—God can be, to name a few: father, teacher, friend, or provider. He is experienced in the daily lives of believers as a being that exercises his own agency and with whom they can interact and have a relationship (Luhmann 2012). For the female pastors in this study, as for Pitt (2012) and Luhmann's (2012) participants, God speaks to individuals in audible, discernible ways. There may be a time-lapse between "call" and "action," but there is the sense that the decision is being made in response, and in some cases in obedience, to a higher power.

### "Mounting Dissatisfaction"

Pastors like Lucy and Shira described hearing God's call in a dramatic and sudden fashion, but this is not the only way transition stories unfolded. Other pastors described their "call" as more of a gradual realization—the product of a series of encouragements and events over a longer period of time. This variation typically involved mounting dissatisfaction with the meaning of one's life or one's current career. The experience of these women seemed to better align with what Rose (1988:41) calls "first doubts"—a gradual and growing sense of unease with one's current role in light of organizational change, burn out, or other events. As with many of Pitt's (2012) participants, some of mine described their call experience as being a more "ordinary,"

gradual transition. For example, Stella, a former math teacher, described feeling that all was not quite right, despite the fact that her career was on track and that in most respects she had the life she wanted: "I had all of these outward things going, but inside I was empty, and so that's when I sort of made the commitment to follow God not just for a couple of months or a couple of years but for the rest of my life."

For these participants, the call to enter Christian ministry came as less of a surprise than it did for those who were confident and happy in their present careers. In their growing unhappiness, these women had been mentally moving away from their current career path already, and so the call merely provides the catalyst needed to consummate the change.

Cindy's story provides an example of a "call" experienced in the context of existing dissatisfactions. A former retail worker, Cindy, described feeling a mounting discontent with her work environment:

I was very discouraged in that retail kind of world and some of the things that I saw happening. I felt very ill at ease with, frankly, graft and fraud and things like that that I could see happening in the company that I worked for. So, I was a bit disillusioned and I met someone who at the time said, "Have you thought about pastoral counseling?" So I entered seminary.

Although Cindy came from a background where there were no female role models to follow in her church, and where she had never imagined herself in the role of minister, her dissatisfaction with her

former life and the reinforcement and affirmation she received as she started and then continued her seminary training encouraged her to keep moving in the direction of pastoral ministry. Cindy did not describe a surprising spiritual encounter with God. Instead, she experienced her call in what some participants describe as a "still small voice"—through the encouragement of friends and family, and a growing confidence that she had something to offer as a minister.

Pauline told a similar story about her mounting unhappiness as director of student services at an educational institution. Originally, the job was fulfilling and exciting, but new leadership brought changes she felt were detrimental to the organization:

Quite a lot of people left. My self-esteem went down so badly, um, and, you know, God's funny. At that time God spoke to me—I went up for prayer for my husband actually, for his career sort of choice, and had this little nudge that maybe I should be considering another career. Oh really? And a few weeks later while I'm having communion really sensed, wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to do this [serve communion] for people? And so that was sort of the start of my journey.

Pauline explained how she wrestled with problems at work, low self-esteem, and doubt. However, over the course of the next year, through a women's prayer and study group, she began to feel a growing pull towards a life in God's service. She described the steps she took to get into Bible college and then to go through her church's ordination processes to be like putting a leaf in a stream: "I'm doing the first

thing, and you're [God] gonna have to carry that down all the [way]...And then, one day, waking up and seeing that I have a collar on and going—I guess you [God] did it!"

The stories of call that involve mounting dissatisfaction exhibit a more gradual change in direction and begin well before the call is experienced. In a sense the stage is set in these cases with the women finding themselves unhappy, incomplete, uneasy, or feeling that something is missing in their lives. They are primed for change. However, this makes the decision to respond to God's call no less fraught with sacrifices and difficulties. These women too face challenges and choices as they reorient their lives. However, they differed from other participants in that they perceived that there was *less* to lose—and actually much to gain—in leaving an unfulfilling, as opposed to a rewarding or promising, career.

### "Anomie" Call Stories

Finally, some women experienced their "call" in the midst of a tumultuous life event or a state of what I describe as *anomie*. Anomie is a term coined by sociologist Robert Merton (1957) to describe the consequences of moments of great societal change and upheaval. At these moments, Merton argued, individuals and societies may experience *anomie* or a sense of normlessness, where values and standards are shifting and there is little certainty about how to respond or behave. The term is apt in this case because some women go through precisely such an experience, finding themselves at a point of chaos in their lives and in need of new norms, guidelines, and direction.

Kierstie described one such moment: her daughter had married and moved away permanently. Kierstie's life had been so interconnected with her daughter's, and her identity so grounded in her role as mother, that she found herself at a loss:

I was 45 years old and my entire adult life I was parenting, and suddenly my official job as parent had come to an end and...when she got married and moved an hour away, suddenly I realized, about a month after that, I had a huge hole in my life because I wasn't actively participating in her life.

Determined to fill the hole, Kierstie began considering her options. One day, she found and started looking at some of her daughter's literature on Bible colleges. This prompted a recollection from God that nudged her forward:

I thought—well, that's kind of interesting. And then God reminded me that I, I never considered myself a college dropout, but I had completed one year of college and then I did not return, I got married instead... And I remember when I had done that, I thought—I can always go back. And so after—what was that, 25 years? Gee. It was 26 years. After that I was reminded [by God], “You said you could always go back.”

In spite of her insecurities about having been out of school for so long, this reminder from God about her own previous commitment to herself encouraged Kierstie to “take the plunge” and start taking classes. As she continued to work on her ministry degree part-time, she describes sensing God's “call” and encouragement with every step she took forward.

Another example was offered by Dana. After teaching for 11 years and becoming department head, Dana reluctantly applied for a new position of leadership in her school overseeing the math, science, and technology programs:

I had a significant Holy Spirit<sup>6</sup> moment because, again, I was like I'm not gonna apply. The night before the applications were due, it was such a significant prodding by the Spirit that I just, I have to. I have to apply. And so I did and I interviewed—and I didn't get the job.

Being passed over for the promotion was difficult for Dana, all the more so because she was certain that she had been guided by God to apply in the first place. The fact that she did not get the position left her restless, questioning what the point had been and what she wanted for her future. A few months later, Dana learned about an opening at her local church. She started to wonder whether that was where she was meant to be and whether the promotion falling through was God's way of bringing her to a point where she was open for the change he had in mind for her. She decided to leave teaching and take the position at her church, which ultimately culminated in pursuing a career in ministry.

<sup>6</sup> The Holy Spirit is also God in the Christian tradition. For Protestants, God is one being who expresses himself through three parts or persons—Father (God), Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit. It is believed that God speaks and works in the lives of his followers most directly through the person of the Holy Spirit. However, sometimes my participants talked about hearing *God's* voice as well, so there are different names or ways of referring to this same deity. Dana here clearly assumed, perhaps in light of my own Christian background, that I understood what a “Holy Spirit moment” meant within the Christian framework—that she was hearing from and being directed by God.

Samantha, a mother and therapist, also experienced a time of inner turmoil leading up to her “call” experience. Samantha was in throes of a marriage breakdown and divorce:

So as the marriage started to decline and I was getting more depressed and more like, ok, what? You know, I'm not going to work some stupid job and have my kids raised by other people so that I can get you [her ex-husband] a bigger boat—like, it's that sort of thing. So it was in the midst of that, 1994, during Lent that I woke up one morning and had this profound dream or vision that I had to be an ordained minister, and was hyperventilating and, you know, I phoned my sister and she said, “Well, we've all been waiting for you, you know, to be happy and figure it out.”

As she recalibrated and started to consider what life after divorce would mean for her and her children, Samantha found herself reassessing her priorities. It was in the context of this period of upheaval and reassessment that she heard the call, waking up one morning to an experience she describes as profound—a vision that left her feeling certain that she was meant to be a minister. Encouraged by her sister's positive reaction, she began moving in the direction of ministry.

Whether they involve a job loss, a child moving away from home, a divorce, a time of illness, or failing to receive a promotion, life-changing events can be the catalysts that leave women open to feeling called and propel them out of one career and into ministry. While anomie is generally connected in the sociological literature with negative out-

comes for individuals, outcomes such as suicide, deviance, and social disintegration (Durkheim 1897; Cloward 1959; Galtung 1996; Rosenbaum and Kuntze 2003), in the case of this study's participants, anomie provided fertile ground for more positive outcomes: the birthing of new possibilities, renewal, and a re-evaluation of one's life purpose.

### (Re)Storying the Past

The paper has dealt thus far with how women are led to careers in Christian ministry. The data show that women feel compelled or “called” to ministry, though their experiences of call come in different forms. Whatever form their call experiences took, for all of the women, the decision involved a sharp break with life as they had known it. This raises the question of what the disruption in their biographical trajectories meant for them in identity terms. As Somers (1994) observes, in defining themselves, people seek continuity and engage in narrative work to achieve it, stringing together seemingly disjointed events in their lives to tell a coherent story about who they are. Abandoning established career paths—as a school principal, working in retail, working for the government, or running one's own business—to pursue a career in Christian ministry qualifies as a significant disjuncture. Once women make the decision to enter formal ministry, how do they make sense of their prior life experiences? In this section of the paper, I address how participants reconciled their past and present lives; namely, how they reinterpreted their pasts in ways that connected them directly with their current careers.

### *Prior Experience as Ministry Preparation*

Many of the participants spoke about their prior careers not as missteps or what they did until they eventually found their true calling, but as an *essential* part of their journey to ministry. They came to understand the skills those lines of work gave them as assets in their current role as pastors. In this respect, too, the notion of call figured prominently, in the sense that they understood God to be working according to a grand plan, one that might have included preparing them for the role he ultimately had in mind by giving them life experiences they would be able to draw on and use.

Cindy, for example, observed that her seven years in retail stood her in good stead in comparison to most of her colleagues, since most pastors find it challenging to acquire the skills needed to manage the business aspects of running a church: “You have to be able to administer funds, you have to be able to supervise people. So I felt in some ways that that [my business experience] was a gift,” Cindy said.

Patty came to ministry after pursuing acting and theatre in her studies and as a career. Again, she uses her call to ministry to ground her understanding of why she first felt called to pursue acting. She framed these prior experiences as giving her the tools she needed to be an effective preacher:

So now I know what all that time in theatre was for—because, boy, did I learn so much! I learned about public speaking, how to speak well, you know, all the things that public speakers need to do to be good

communicators. So I am very grateful for my background in film and television.

Stella similarly defined her prior work training as actually being ministry training in disguise. As a high school teacher, her early life ambitions were centered around entering education administration, so she completed various leadership and development training programs, including a Master in Education, before entering ordained ministry. She currently works in denominational leadership and describes her previous leadership training as being just what was needed for her present pastoral role:

I thought I had it [my life direction] all figured out and it turns out I didn’t, but having that educational and leadership development piece certainly helped for this role because that’s a huge piece of what this role is. And so that was the piece—the two pieces really kind of fit together.

For Shira, it was her social work skills that helped her in her pastoral role; for several former teachers, it was the teaching skills they had acquired that they valued. In each case, the women redefined former life experiences as necessary training ground for their present ministries.

### *Prior Experience as Ministry*

Another way that the women made sense of their prior work experiences was to redefine their former career as ministry in and of itself. They asserted that they were really “doing ministry” all along, though they and others may not have recognized it as such at the time. In other words, they maintained

the constancy of their identity as instruments of God, though at different points in their lives they may have enacted the role in and through different careers. They understood ministry as a devotion to God and a commitment to do his work in ways that need not necessarily involve formal ordination and the title of “minister.”

Pauline, for example, blurred the distinction between what she does as pastor versus her previous work in administration in a graduate program:

Even before I was ordained I really felt like I was in ministry. My previous position for 7 years...really had parts that, you know, were caring for people, so, yeah. And, you know, even when you’re a lay person, if you are open and willing, God can call you into ministry, you know, wherever doing whatever.

Pauline saw little fundamental difference in the work she has always done, though in one role she functioned as a lay person and in the other she is recognized as a minister. For Pauline, ministry is defined by the spirit in which one serves. To the extent that one allows oneself to be guided by God’s call to serve others, one is engaged in ministry.

Selah, a teacher for 15 years, saw her teaching role in similar terms. She described her decision to become a teacher as just as much a “call” as her subsequent “call” to pastoral ministry. For her, teaching was so much more than simply an opportunity to educate. She defined it as a way to minister to the needs of the children one teaches and their families, though this work is carried out outside of the confines of church walls.

Patty, too, defined her former acting career as a form of ministry, a chance to reach out to colleagues and audiences alike, to “speak” to them or touch them in some meaningful way:

I believe that the number of years that I did that [professional acting] the Lord opened up a million opportunities to be an example of a Christian in that environment which is very dark, a very dark world.

In all of these cases, the women gave their secular work a meaning they might not have at the time—a meaning that established continuity in their minds between past and present. They saw themselves as always having been an instrument of God in the world, positioned where He wanted them to be, doing what he wanted them to be doing all along. Pitt’s (2012) participants justified their *present* secular work in a very similar manner, suggesting that their call to minister to people reached far beyond the four walls of a church building.

### *“Now I Understand Why...”*

A call to ministry may shape not only the way women see their prior careers, but also the way they attribute meaning to other significant, often painful, life events. There is a sense of “now I understand why that had to happen to me,” which comes after experiencing a call to ministry and living it out for a time.

One such case involved Dana, the “teacher turned pastor,” who did not get the department head position she had applied for. Though devastated at the



time, Dana looked back on the experience differently during the interview:

So, I'm in the middle of this thinking, what's all this for? And afterwards I could see, God had me go through this A) because it's his plan not mine, so there was an obedience check in there, but also this removed the "if only," the "what if," the "coulda shoulda"—all those kinds of things because I did it, I did the process, right?

In hindsight, Dana interpreted the experience as one that taught her that when God closes one door, he opens another.

Another example involved Patty, the former actor, who was forthright about the pain she had experienced in her past. She was diagnosed with uterine cancer at the age of 24 and went through a long stretch of infertility before eventually giving birth to a daughter. The prospect of not being able to conceive was a source of great anguish for Patty and her memories of the experience still sting. However, looking back, Patty observed:

I say it was, it was a determination on my part and I think a determination on the part of the Holy Spirit to keep me focused on Him and to keep me focused on ministry, and I think if I'd had three kids when I was in my 20's, I may not have had that focus...I felt the Holy Spirit's call on me the whole time, throughout my life, with regards to professional calling.

From her vantage point as a minister, Patty looked back and attributed meaning to what, at the time,

was a senseless experience of emptiness and sadness. She explained that she now appreciated more fully why God had put her through that period of childlessness. It was his way of steering her down the path he wanted her to take. Patty also lost several family members as a young woman, including her parents. She had spent a number of years providing care for her ailing parents and also an aunt. This experience, too, she looked back on as having served the purpose of preparing her for ministry. It taught her how to care for others and how to deal with death and dying, key aspects of her ministerial role. She saw purpose even in the story of resilience and perseverance that her life tells, offering others inspiration and hope as they dealt with their own trials:

Through all that suffering, my faith has never once shaken. So I don't—I'm beginning to think that God uses people profoundly when they have suffered because they can't—you can sympathize and you can even practice empathy, but until you've really walked through the valley of the shadow of death and come through it, I don't know how really well you can serve.

These stories and many others like them in the interviews demonstrate how the decision to move into Christian ministry was employed by the women to give meaning to events that occurred in the *past*, as well as *current* and *future* endeavors. They construct a narrative of call in line with the norms of other such narratives, but also weave their unique turning points into the story in a way that blends the past—sometimes surprisingly seamlessly—with the present.

## Discussion & Conclusion

While there have been many studies that have looked at the history of, and barriers to, women's entrance into ministry positions in the Christian church, there is a paucity of literature on the perspectives of women who actually enter ministry. This paper has started to fill the gap by presenting a qualitative analysis of the stories women tell of their call to pastoral ministry. On a substantive level, the paper sheds light on what leads women to take up these roles in their churches—many of them among the first in their denominations to do so. The data show that women, like their male counterparts, feel "called" to ministry. While they see themselves as exercising agency in how they respond to these calls, they understand the calls as originating with God, though sometimes mediated or affirmed through family and friends. The calls come in the form of dramatic and unexpected interruptions to the smooth and on-going flow of their normal lives (as with "sudden revelation" call stories) or more gradual promptings or pulls towards ministry through experiencing "mounting dissatisfaction" with their current lives. A third possibility, one that Pitt (2012) did not find among the ministers that he interviewed and that perhaps warrants greater attention in future research, are calls that I have described as "anomic." In these cases, calls blossom in the context of major upheavals in the women's lives brought on by such events as divorce, the death of individuals close to them, or the loss of a job. The disruptions create a space for women to re-evaluate their priorities and goals, and from their perspective, to "hear" God's plan for them as they piece their lives back together in ministry positions.

The data also show that second-career pastors' decisions to go into ministry bring with them the dilemma of how to bring together the two disparate trajectories of their lives—secular and sacred—and how to organize their life stories as meaningful and understandable narratives for both themselves and others. Here, too, the experience of call figures prominently. The data suggest that it is the turning point itself—the experience of call—that allows women to accomplish the work of creating meaning and bridging the gap. The call to ministry becomes the fulcrum around which seemingly contradictory past and present experiences can balance and teeter to be reconciled without tipping. Women re-define their past careers in the secular world as ministry preparation or categorize them as ministry in and of themselves, with even painful past experiences being endowed with a meaning relevant to their role as ministers. In other words, their pasts are interpreted through the lens of the present and given a meaning that creates a smooth and coherent trajectory rather than a disjointed one. The women come to see their past experiences as necessary and inevitable steps leading them to where they were ultimately meant to be, though they may not have understood them in these terms at the time.

The need to re-story one's life, however, is a function of the fact that all of the women interviewed for this study were pursuing ministry as a second career. Whether, and to what extent, this process occurs among those who commit to a career in ministry early in their lives is another question for future research to explore.

Since it is more likely to be women rather than men who pursue ministry as a second career, this aspect of becoming a minister may be a key point of difference between female and male ministers.

There is a cautionary tale in attending closely to the perspectives of women in ministry and their own understandings of their life's journeys. Given the experience of women in relation to institutionalized religion, it would be easy to assume that their stories would be stories of exclusion, inequality, and marginalization. However, while the women in this study were quite prepared to point out the histories of exclusion and blocked opportunities that they themselves had experienced, there was little resentment or criticism of their churches. Instead of emphasizing exclusion, they focused on the advantages of having had the experiences they did prior to entering ministry. As one participant described it, her pre-ministry life was "a gift." To suggest that such framings are simply the women's way of rationalizing the sexism to which they were subjected or perhaps even of defending an institution they had finally succeeded in penetrating is to discount their lived experiences. To focus only on the "blocked opportunities" elements of their stories would have been to miss the broader and richer understandings they have of their trajectory of involvement with their churches. In any future work on women in ministry, there would be value in listening carefully and respecting women's stories, and in resisting the temptation to privilege alternate interpretations of the women's experiences over their own.

Also worthy of greater attention are the questions of how calls to ministry differ from impulses to make other types of career transitions, or any major mid-life transition for that matter, and how social actors who go through these transitions explain them to themselves and others. While there are certainly unique aspects to making the move into ministry—including the sense that one is not responsible for initiating the move, but simply responding to God's call—there are also probably more generic features of the process that characterize any significant transition. More comparative work involving transitions of various kinds would allow a clearer identification of the unique versus generic features of transition experiences.

Similarly, the usefulness in this analysis of Mead's (1929) concept of "specious present," combined with Somers' (1994) notion of narratively constructed identities, invites reflection on other cases where these processes are at play. Mead's theory of time in particular, while debated theoretically, has generated few case studies that look in empirical terms at precisely how pasts are constructed and reconstructed in the present. What prompts such reconstructions and how do social actors understand what they are doing, especially in cases such as this one, where there is an awareness of the fact that the past is being reconstructed. Bringing Somers' insights into the picture, how much do constructions of the past have to do with concerns about self and the need to constitute coherent narratives about ourselves and our identities? Future research would do well to attend to the temporal aspects of identity work and the construction of self through narratives.

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