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Emerging Trends in Congregational Engagement and Leadership

Edited by
Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi

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Guest Editor

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Cover image courtesy of Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi

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Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi

Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi is Associate Professor of Leadership and Formation at Iliff School of Theology. She received her PhD in Educational Leadership, Research, and Policy from the University of Colorado and is an Ordained Minister in the United Church of Christ. Her main research interests include congregations and religious leadership, pedagogy, and decolonial theory and theology.

Preface

Myriad local, national, and global phenomena are altering—or have the potential to alter—congregational life in profound ways. Relevant and critically engaged research is needed in order to better understand how congregations and their leaders respond to, and are impacted by, these phenomena. As such, this Special Issue focuses on emerging trends in congregational engagement and leadership related to a variety of pressing topics, including COVID-19, climate change, Christian nationalism and political polarization, multiculturalism, church staffing, technological changes, individualization, Afrofuturism and the Black Church, stewardship and economic practices, community organizing, gendered pastoral vocational paths, and clergy leadership development and lifelong learning. Together, these contributions highlight the study of congregational life and leadership as an interdisciplinary endeavor that draws upon sociological, anthropological, historical, ecclesial, theological, and other frameworks to better understand the dynamic nature of religious life. Anyone who is a religious leader or a congregational participant, who studies congregations and religious leaders, or who cares about the flourishing of these entities in a changing world will find salient theoretical and practical wisdom in this collection.

Kristina I. Lizardy-Hajbi
Guest Editor

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Editorial

In Defense of Studying Congregations

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In the midst of penning this editorial, I was also working on an encyclopedic article on religious leadership that attempted to distinguish between societal understandings of "religion" and "spirituality." In my review of various reference works and research articles, spirituality was predominantly painted as the more alluring, even glamorous, concept. In tracing the evolution of this term, Bregman noted that spirituality has moved beyond religion, even as its origins and continuing configurations remain rooted in religion, to constitute a more individualized and universalized "innate potential or capacity or attribute at the center of all persons" (Bregman 2014, p. 16). Religion, on the other hand, has largely been constructed within public consciousness as institutionalized, hierarchical, and focused on adherence to particular dogmas and practices, perhaps akin to what science (rationality) is to religion (non-rationality) in modern/Enlightenment paradigms (Bregman 2014, p. 6).

Such simplified and erroneously dichotomized understandings of these concepts within public imagination have positioned religion and its related histories and contextualizations at the losing end of the spectrum. This includes congregations as "organized group[s] of committed individuals that adhere to and propagate a specific interpretation of explanations of existence based on supernatural assumptions through statements about the nature and workings of the supernatural and about ultimate meaning" (Johnson and Grim 2013, p. 111). Contrary to public imagination, however, "The impulse to congregate is present in virtually all the world's living religious traditions" (Ammerman et al. 1998, p. 7). Congregational life is on the rise globally, as most of the world's major religious groups increased in adherents from 2010 to 2020, placing the number of religiously affiliated individuals at over six billion—more than three-fourths of the total world population—as of 2020 (Hackett et al. 2025). Even in the U.S. where organized religion has been on the decline, research reveals that attendance rates within congregations have increased since COVID-19 (Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2025). Regardless of generalizations, congregations—and their leaders—continue to operate as critically important contributors to organized life by serving a variety of individual, communal, and societal purposes and, therefore, are both necessary and worthy of study. In many ways, congregations are *extraordinary ordinary* organizations of human life. This extraordinary ordinary dynamic manifests in two primary rationales that ground the study of congregations and their leaders.

Firstly, congregations and their leaders are *extraordinary* subjects of study because they create, sustain, and transform meaning for individuals and communities in ways that are relatively unique among organizations. In other words, congregations and their leaders help make sense of the world and beyond-world in a manner that is qualitatively different from work, social, or other groups due to orientations around the "supernatural" and "ultimate meaning," as referenced previously by Johnson and Grim (2013, p. 111). Between June 2024 and June 2025 alone, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*—only one

among several prominent journals featuring research related to congregations—focused on differences in religious affiliation, religiosity, and/or participation in congregations relative to the following views or practices: COVID-19 (Corcoran et al. 2024; Seto and Ortiz 2024), religious diversity (Fierro et al. 2025; Greenberg et al. 2024), the environment (Ho et al. 2024), science and religion (Lu and Joosse 2024; Noy and O'Brien 2024), morality (Chvaja 2024; Reimer and Watts 2025), LGBTQ rights and abortion (Lefevor et al. 2024), capital punishment (Chuang et al. 2024), racism and anti-racism (Martí 2025; Kalinowski et al. 2024), radical action (Besta et al. 2024), and politics (Campbell et al. 2025; Schnabel 2024).[1] Even if congregations may not have been the explicit subject of study in all of these contributions, the articles as a whole demonstrate that factors around religious and/or congregational engagement possess a distinct—though not wholly discernible—role in shaping perspectives and actions, even when accounting for other potentially mediating factors (such as political affiliation, for example).

The extraordinariness of congregations and their leaders as entities worth studying also lies in their impacts on participants' lives. Drawing upon articles from the same journal and time period, religious affiliation, religiosity, and/or and participation were related with increased overall health (Cranney 2024), emotional wellbeing (Kent et al. 2024), body appreciation (Razmus et al. 2024), and relationship stability (Boulis and Torgler 2024) for individuals and families. Conversely, other studies have revealed the negative impacts that congregations and their leaders have on individuals and families, particularly on minoritized persons (Barnes 2024; Sorrell et al. 2024), often leading to disaffiliation from congregations and traditions (Bok 2025; Erhard 2025).

Again, while many of these articles do not involve data obtained directly from congregations or their leaders—and considering that the correlation between factors does not equate to causation—these studies are largely informed by individuals who have participated, or continue to participate, in congregations. Stated plainly, the locus for religiosity and religious affiliation is the congregation as a foundational social unit of religious life. Even as other types of groups create social and ideological cohesion through meaning making, scholars recognize by and large that "the sociology of contemporary religious behavior is vital to understanding a whole range of other contemporary social and political issues" (Glass 2019, p. 9). Such "religious behavior" is most immediately observed through the context of the congregation. In this manner, congregations offer an extraordinariness in their abilities to pervade—or intertwine with, to use a more positive phrase—the totality of worldviews, expressions, experiences, and activities of human being and doing.

In a more *ordinary* sense, however, congregations and their leaders are quite similar to other kinds of groups and leaders. This ordinariness is evidenced through two prevailing dynamics. First, like most organizations, congregations and their leaders function as fitting units of study for understanding individual and communal forces within organizational life, including the patterns of organizations themselves and the varying leadership interactions therein. Most broader frameworks developed by leadership, organizational theory, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other scholars beyond the disciplines of religion and theology also apply to congregations and their leaders, even though their area of study usually lies beyond religious contexts. Granted, there is a great deal of overlap between some of these disciplines and religious and theological studies, speaking as a sociologist of religion. For other disciplines, however—such as organizational theory and leadership—greater interdisciplinarity is needed in order to center and draw upon congregations and their leaders as worthy subjects of study. As Tracy et al. observed, "While religion plays such an obvious and prominent role in virtually every society and economy, organization and management theorists have largely ignored it" (Tracey et al. 2014, p. 4). Moreover, while the field of leadership studies has taken care in increasing

the study of religion within secular organizations—noting that much of the scholarship in the *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion*, the *Journal of Religion, Management and Governance*, and the *Journal of Studies in Religion, Spirituality and Management* falls in this category—it has not fully embraced the study of religious leaders themselves as subjects of inquiry. On the whole, these two fields would do well to follow the lead of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and others who have sought to study religious leaders both within and beyond congregational contexts and in conversation with the theories and tools of their respective disciplines.

Likewise, but perhaps to a lesser extent, those situated within religion and theology might find avenues for drawing upon the vast body of research related to organizational and leadership studies. Even as the loci of contexts for such research have been secularized businesses and nonprofit organizations, learnings and theories developed in these contexts also possess applicability for congregations and their leaders. Religion and theology journals that draw upon broader organizational and leadership theories and practices are few and far between; however, the *Journal of Religious Leadership* and the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* are two notable exceptions, along with a few journals that cover the theory and practice of ministry. Such scholarship, when produced and shared with and among congregations and leaders themselves as the subjects of study, possesses the potential to shape processes and practices in religious life and leadership as a whole. Now more than ever, congregations and their leaders need resources that aid self-understandings and that might offer tools for increased organizational functioning. The ordinariness of these entities—in simpler words, their similarities to other types of organizations—should be envisioned as an asset that scholars and practitioners alike might harness toward greater flourishing.

Second, congregations and their leaders are ordinary because they reflect both the range and the possibility of responses to local and global phenomena present in communities and societies at large. In short, they are microcosms of macrocosms, helping us to understand cultural phenomena and how other organizations, leaders, and communities might respond (or not) to societal shifts and events. This ordinariness constitutes the main theme of this Special Issue's call for proposals, crafted to gather wisdom from congregations and their leaders about how they were responding (or not responding) to the impacts of COVID-19, racialized and/or religious violence and nationalist movements, climate change, globalization, political instability, immigration, demographic shifts around age, ethnicity, and gender, technological advancements, and other phenomena. Even though some articles in this Special Issue examined subjects that *seem* related only to congregations or religious leaders, they possess implications for organizations, leaders, and communities more broadly. To invoke a stark biblical image, the rain falls "on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45)—meaning that all organizations are impacted by the same "weather" of various phenomena, though often in different ways. To be clear, any research engaged with lived religious communities and leaders can only claim an understanding of *that* particular context in *that* particular time and *that* particular place. Simultaneously, however, study of the particular can reveal that which has relevance for *other* particulars beyond the singular.

On a practical level, congregations and their leaders are models for how others might respond to cultural phenomena. Congregations function as community hubs, cultivate safety nets, and engage in witness and advocacy on issues of justice, both singularly and in partnership with other entities. To be fair, many of them do so imperfectly or find themselves discussing rather than engaging in such work; yet their deliberations and their attempts deserve attention because others can learn from those activities as well. Within the same set of *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* issues cited above, some articles centered

on differences by religious affiliation, religiosity, and/or participation in congregations relative to increased charitable giving and volunteering (Goldner et al. 2025; Taggart and Jensen 2024; Yalley 2025), refugee resettlement (Lee 2024), helping people in poverty (Parsell and Stambe 2024), LGBTQ activism (Wilkins et al. 2024), and racial justice (Glazier et al. 2025). For those of us who have worked with congregations for many years, it is easy to critique these communities for their lack of responsiveness to cultural phenomena; and that critique is an important one. At the same time, it seems that there are at least some congregations that, together with their leaders, are responding—or trying to respond—in ways that are congruent with their contexts, beliefs, and traditions. Several contributions within this Special Issue add to existing scholarship by offering new frameworks, best practices, and practical recommendations, all based on experiences and research with congregations and religious leaders.

In sum, these extraordinary ordinary qualities firmly (re)establish congregations as one of the most important units—if not the most important unit—for the ongoing study of religious life today. Even as spirituality continues to be centralized in public consciousness, religious structures of organizational life tether spiritual discourses to history and tradition, existing, adapting, and even flourishing amidst change and challenge. Beyond journals that focus more directly on congregational research, such as the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and *Review of Religious Research*, additional scholarship is needed in comprehensive publications like *Religions*. This Special Issue constitutes an attempt to bring into the wider religious discourse a series of articles centering congregations and their leaders, both to highlight emerging trends and to encourage future Special Issues like this one. It is my enduring hope that more scholars recognize the extraordinary ordinariness of these enduring entities and, subsequently, proliferate this journal and others with research on, with, and for congregations and their leaders.

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Notes

[1] I read abstracts from printed copies of the June 2024, September 2024, December 2024, March 2025, and June 2025 issues of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and cited articles with research that focused on one or more congregations and/or leaders or that used religious affiliation, religiosity, religious participation, or religious membership as variables.

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Article

Churches and COVID-19: Key Trends in Congregational Life Since the Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home orders disrupted religious life across the United States, forcing congregations to rapidly adapt to unprecedented challenges. While existing research has explored the pandemic's impact on individual religiosity, this article centers on how congregations were reshaped by the pandemic—sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently. Drawing on nationally representative survey data from the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations project and the long-running Faith Communities Today initiative, this article analyzes trends in worship attendance, other forms of commitment to and engagement with congregations, congregational openness to change, and clergy well-being. The findings show that in-person worship attendance continues to decline, while online worship was adopted widely during the pandemic and remains common. Programming, volunteering, and financial giving have rebounded but still fall short of pre-pandemic levels or current needs. Many congregations embraced change early in the pandemic but have since reverted to old routines. Clergy are in relatively good health, yet growing numbers are reconsidering their futures in ministry. These shifts reveal the pandemic's lasting impact on congregational life and raise critical questions for clergy, lay leaders, and researchers about institutional resilience, innovation, and leadership sustainability. The findings underscore the complex and evolving nature of post-pandemic ministry.

Keywords: pandemic; congregations; attendance

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home orders profoundly impacted religious life in the United States. People faced instability, disrupted daily routines, and significant existential and moral questions. Similarly, churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other religious spaces encountered unprecedented challenges and obstacles they had never previously addressed. Five years after the emergency phase of the pandemic, this is an opportune time to examine how congregations navigated that precarious period and assess their current state as a result. While much attention has focused on individual-level religious change, this article centers on how congregations as institutions were reshaped—sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently.

Several scholars have examined how the pandemic impacted religion in the United States. Most of this research, however, concentrates on its effects on religiosity at the individual level. Researchers have investigated whether religious beliefs, belonging, and behaviors have changed. Findings indicate that some ideological beliefs may have shifted during the pandemic, but on the whole, religious affiliation, and behaviors like reading scripture have remained relatively stable (Barna 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Witt-Swanson et al.

2023). Additionally, Gallup Poll data point to a temporary rise in the perception of religion's influence in U.S. society early in the pandemic, but this increase was short-lived (Jones 2021).

The biggest change in personal religiosity has been new patterns of worship service attendance. The disruption to daily and weekly rhythms caused by the pandemic was a catalyst for many people to change their habits. Early in the pandemic, there were fewer weekly attendees and a downward drift in the frequency of service attendance—especially among those who already attended infrequently (Barna 2023c; Witt-Swanson et al. 2023). In addition to changes in attendance frequency, the pandemic also prompted more fluidity in congregational affiliation. Six months into the pandemic, 18% of Americans reported attending a different congregation or none at all compared to before the pandemic, reflecting increased rates of both church switching and departures (Higgins and Djupe 2022). Recent data from the Pew Research Center indicate that, overall, the percentage of U.S. adults participating in worship services in 2024 is comparable to the percentage from 2020, despite the possibility of some fluctuations during that period (Tyson et al. 2025). While Pew reports similar levels at the two time points, the mode by which people participate in services has shifted (Tyson et al. 2025). Many people changed from going in person before the pandemic to watching online during the early stages of the pandemic, to finally going back in person once the serious risk of the pandemic subsided (Nortey and Rotolo 2023; Tyson et al. 2025). In general, most people were satisfied with their online worship experience and selected it because of convenience (Faverio et al. 2023).

Research has also investigated the effect of the pandemic on the strength of people's faith. During the summer of 2020, nearly 30% of American adults reported that their faith became stronger as a result of the pandemic (Sahgal and Connaughton 2021). Even in 2024, a few more years removed from the emergency phase of the pandemic, 10% of American adults said that the pandemic had a major impact on their personal religious or spiritual life, and another 20% said that it had a minor impact (Tyson et al. 2025). The direction of that impact, however, varies in that almost equal percentages said that the impact of the pandemic was negative, positive, or neutral (Tyson et al. 2025).

Taken together, the research summarized above shows that the pandemic impacted personal religiosity as well as an individual's decisions about how to engage in communal religious practices. However, it still remains unclear if these changes to religion at the personal level are permanent changes or if similar to other significant global events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the fluctuations in religiosity are only temporary (Newport 2020). Overall, however, it is clear that scholars are interested in the role of the pandemic on individual-level religiosity.

While individual religious beliefs and practices are important, so too are religious organizations. Congregations function as key social institutions whose organizational response to crisis shapes community resilience, moral discourse, and public service. Far less attention, by contrast, has been paid to how religious institutions were transformed by the pandemic. As this article will explain in more detail, the impact of COVID-19 extended beyond personal faith to include significant changes at the organizational level. Religious organizations, namely congregations, were not immune to the pandemic's disruptions. The unprecedented restrictions on in-person gatherings presented a barrier to many congregations. As also experienced by workplaces, schools, and other gatherings, churches had to rapidly adapt their plans and implement changes to continue their ministries and meet online. This disruption to routine forced many congregations to reconsider long-standing practices and implement changes in ways they had not previously imagined.

What were the biggest changes in congregations because of the pandemic? Which shifts were temporary, and which may have set congregations on new paths? This article

will answer these questions by analyzing trends across the whole U.S. congregational landscape. Drawing on quantitative data from nationally representative surveys, this article highlights broad patterns rather than isolated or anecdotal accounts. Specifically, this analysis examines national trends in worship attendance, other forms of engagement within a congregation, the openness of a congregation to change, and how clergy leaders have weathered the impacts. This article will outline the major changes and discuss the implications of these transitions.

2. Research Methodology

To examine how the pandemic impacted congregations nationally, this paper draws on several surveys from the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations research project as well as pre-existing research on congregations from the ongoing Faith Communities Today research initiative.

The primary data source for this analysis was research from the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) project, a five-year, mixed-method study funded by the Lilly Endowment. Launched in 2021, the EPIC project aims to track the U.S. congregational landscape and document the ripple effects of the pandemic as they continue to play out in subsequent years. A central component of the EPIC project is cross-sectional, national surveys of congregations completed by one key informant per congregation (typically the clergy leader) collected across the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Specifically, data were collected at the following time points: summer 2021 (n = 2071), fall 2021 (n = 820), spring 2022 (n = 615), spring 2023 (n = 5211), and fall 2023 (n = 1858). In addition to the key informant surveys, the EPIC project also collected responses from church attendees in fall 2024 (n = 24,165). These attendee-level data add a valuable, alternate perspective on the dynamics unfolding in congregational life, complementing the insights offered by clergy. Data from all these national EPIC surveys serve as the focal data for the analysis in this paper.

The EPIC project builds on the long-standing survey efforts of the Faith Communities Today (FACT) research initiative. FACT is a collaborative effort among a diverse range of Christian denominations and other religious groups that has involved conducting national surveys of congregations across traditions since 2000. These data spanning more than two decades offer historical context for understanding post-pandemic trends seen in the EPIC project. For this paper, the FACT dataset of greatest relevance was from early 2020 (most responses collected pre-pandemic; n = 15,277).

Both the EPIC and FACT surveys include information from congregations about worship attendance, participant demographics, clergy characteristics, finances, programming, technology use, and spiritual vitality, among other topics. Using quantitative analysis of descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations conducted in SPSS, this analysis concentrated on the measures where pandemic-related shifts have been most apparent: worship service attendance, other forms of commitment to a congregation, congregational willingness to change, and clergy well-being.

3. Results

3.1. Patterns in Worship Service Attendance

The most immediate and visible impact of the pandemic on congregations was disruptions to worship service attendance. At the onset of the pandemic, nearly all (80%) congregations suspended in-person gatherings. Those that remained open were primarily concentrated within Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Among the congregations that did pause in-person services, most did not return to their previous rhythms or a

newly established routine for a median of approximately 4 to 12 months depending on religious tradition.

As shown in Table 1, the median in-person worship attendance was approximately 65 people prior to the pandemic and then fell to 45 in 2021. While some recovery was evident by spring 2023 (median 60 attendees), in-person attendance still remained below pre-pandemic levels. However, the decline between 2020 and 2023 aligned with a longer-term trend. The FACT data from 2000 to 2020 document a steady decline in worship attendance from 137 people to 65, a drop of over 50%. This pre-existing downward trend likely reflects the influence of other broader societal forces contributing to disengagement from congregational life, including institutional abuse and financial scandals, the growing entanglement of religion and politics, and the rise of Christian nationalism (Smith 2025). Together, these data suggest that rather than creating a new trend, the pandemic temporarily accelerated the decline. The broader trajectory remains one of gradual decline in in-person attendance over the past two decades.

Table 1. Median in-person worship attendance over time.

Year	Number of People
2000	137
2005	129
2010	105
2015	80
Spring 2020	65
Summer 2021	45
Winter 2021	45
Spring 2022	50
Spring 2023	60
Fall 2023	55

In contrast, the pandemic's most transformative shift was congregations' rapid and widespread adoption of online worship. Prior to the pandemic, only 45% of congregations reported livestreaming their services, and only about half of those did so consistently. By 2021, that figure surged to 86%, and although it decreased slightly to 75% in 2023, it appears to have stabilized as congregations settle into a new normal. Most congregations offering online services did so in a hybrid fashion, combining in-person and virtual attendees. Only a small minority (2%) of congregations worshipped exclusively online in 2023. Notably, Catholic and Orthodox congregations were less likely to offer online worship, likely due to theological views regarding the sacrament of communion.

Remarkably, online worship seems to be a permanent change for those who adopted it. Among the congregations offering online worship in 2023, 80% anticipated continuing to do so in 2028. Additionally, many leaders considered the pivot to online worship to be their congregation's most successful adaptation in response to the pandemic.

Although the number of congregations offering online worship is relatively straightforward to document, accurately measuring attendance at these online services remains challenging. Currently, there is no standardized method for measuring online participants. Some congregations count each view or connected device, others apply a multiplier to account for group viewing, and many do not monitor their online attendance at all. In fact, only about 48% of congregations made any effort to track their online worship attendance. Among the congregations that did report these figures, the median number of online participants was about 25 people. While this figure may partially offset the losses seen in in-person attendance, these online participants tend to be less engaged in the broader life of the congregation and are less likely to contribute financially.

Attendee-level data add further nuance. Only about 7% of attendees routinely participated in online worship, and another 19% mixed their attendance between online and in-person. The primary motivation for attending online was convenience, followed by health-related concerns, avoiding exposure to COVID-19 or the flu, and work schedule conflicts. Nearly half (46%) of the online participants worshiped alone, while just over half did so with at least one other person. Despite physical separation, nearly all online worshippers reported high levels of satisfaction with their experience, and most actively participated in elements of the service, including praying, singing, and reading along.

In summary, while in-person attendance declined from 2020 to 2023, this reflects a long-standing trend rather than a pandemic-specific disruption. The significant attendance loss from the early pandemic period has mostly been recovered—at least back to the level of decline traced from the previous two decades. This indicates that the sharp drop observed early in the pandemic was not a permanent change. The most significant and enduring change brought about by the pandemic is the widespread and sustained integration of online worship. A significant share of congregations quickly pivoted to offering online services, many continue these options in some capacity today, and a majority consider this to be a permanent feature of their ministry. Although only a small percentage of participants used this format for worship, those who did reported meaningful engagement and satisfaction with it.

3.2. Trends in Other Markers of Commitment

Worship service attendance is not the only important component of congregational life. Other forms of participation are equally vital for community building and organizational stability. This section examines three metrics of engagement or commitment: non-worship programming, volunteering, and financial giving.

One surprising finding in the EPIC data is a decline in congregations offering non-worship programming compared to pre-pandemic levels. Many congregations offered fewer programs, such as religious education, fellowship events, or community service, in 2023 than they did in 2020. This decline is somewhat unexpected, especially in light of the social movements that co-occurred with the pandemic and an increased desire for connection with others following the isolation of the lockdown period. The reduction in programs may reflect the lingering effects of pandemic-era limitations, but it could also indicate that congregations are reassessing their capacity and priorities at this critical juncture.

A similar dip is evident in volunteer engagement. Volunteering time is essential in congregations, where staff members alone cannot meet all the programmatic needs and service initiatives of the congregation. Before the pandemic, about 45% of congregation participants regularly volunteered in the congregation. That figure dropped to just 15% during the height of the pandemic. Unlike programming, however, there has been a partial rebound in volunteering. By 2023, the percentage of the congregation regularly volunteering rose to around 35%. While this is an encouraging sign, since 15% would be unsustainable long term, it still falls short of pre-pandemic levels. Further, clergy leaders continue to report difficulty in recruiting volunteers as some people are unable to contribute as much as they once were, and others risk burnout as a small group shoulders a majority of the responsibilities. Attendee-level data echo this, with 24% of church attendees saying they have increased their volunteering in recent years, but only 28% reported volunteering often. This suggests that even where willingness has grown, consistent engagement remains limited.

Another critical marker of commitment is financial giving. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, congregational income has increased overall. In 2023, the median annual income of congregations was approximately USD 165,000, up from USD 120,000 in 2020. In

general, about 80% of a congregation's income comes from participant contributions. The per capita income (total income divided by total attendance) also rose, reaching roughly USD 2222 per person in 2023 compared to USD 2000 in 2020. This indicates that many people increased how much they contributed to their congregation. Attendee-level data reinforce this increase. Notably, 37% of churchgoers reported increasing the percentage of income they gave to their congregation over the past five years. This uptick in giving may reflect increased generosity, heightened awareness of community needs, or even a sense of urgency to sustain a shrinking congregation. Unfortunately, this financial growth has not kept pace with inflation. Even as the total income and per capita giving have increased, so too have the operational costs of running the congregations. Many congregations remain financially strained and uncertain about their long-term sustainability.

Taken together, these trends reveal that while some aspects of congregational commitment have begun to recover, none have returned to pre-pandemic strength and may be struggling to meet the demands of this new period. Congregational programming has declined; volunteering engagement remains below pre-pandemic levels; and although financial giving has increased, it has not kept pace with inflation or rising operational costs. These pressures suggest that many congregations are stretched thin, operating with fewer resources even as expectations and needs remain constant or continue to grow.

3.3. Temporary Openness to Change

Another significant trend observed during the pandemic was a shift in congregations' willingness to embrace change. Historically, most congregations have shown resistance to change, often adhering to long-standing traditions and practices. However, the pandemic presented a crisis that compelled many to adapt in order to survive.

Interestingly, many congregations were willing to change early in the pandemic but have since recalcified into their old patterns. This trend is evident when tracking the percentage of leaders who strongly agree that their congregation is willing to change. The "strongly agree" category is the focus here because it correlates with other key indicators of congregational vitality and strength that are not consistently present among congregations whose leaders only "agree". As shown in Table 2, 23% of key informants strongly agreed in spring 2020—just before the pandemic fully disrupted congregational life—that their congregation was willing to change to meet new challenges. This percentage increased to 39% by summer 2021—the highest level ever recorded in any FACT or EPIC survey. However, this trend did not hold. By fall 2023, that figure declined to 20%, the lowest ever reported in any FACT or EPIC survey. This drop suggests that much of the willingness to change was temporary and situational.

Table 2. Percent of key informants strongly agreeing with "Our congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges".

Year	Percent Strongly Agree
Spring 2020	23%
Summer 2021	39%
Winter 2021	37%
Spring 2022	31%
Spring 2023	21%
Fall 2023	20%

This pattern implies that while many congregations demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt in the face of crisis, they have since reverted to more familiar patterns. The initial flexibility observed during the pandemic may have reflected a willingness to make

one-time emergency adjustments, rather than an ongoing openness to innovation. As the sense of urgency faded, so too did the momentum for change.

This reversion presents a particular challenge for clergy leaders who may see continuous adaptation as necessary for long-term sustainability. For some, the pandemic proved that their congregation could change. But sustaining that change, particularly in the absence of a crisis, may feel uncomfortable or overwhelming to members. Change fatigue may also play a role, as congregations grapple with the ongoing demands of reevaluating programs, policies, and operational norms.

Complementing these findings, attendee-level data show that a notable share of congregants have joined their congregations relatively recently and may bring a fresh perspective on change. In fact, 38% of attendees started attending their congregation in the past five years, which would be during or since the pandemic. Among these new attendees, about 9% were new converts with no prior congregational connection, 23% were re-churched after a gap in participation, and the remaining nearly 70% were switchers from other congregations. Additionally, 63% of all new attendees said that the congregation's alignment with their personal beliefs, values, and preferences was a very important reason for joining, indicating a sorting effect in which participants selected their congregation based on shared values rather than traditional factors like location or pre-existing social ties. It is likely that some of these new attendees were drawn by pandemic-era responses that made the congregation appealing to them. Because these individuals lack firsthand experience of their congregation's pre-pandemic traditions, their presence may lower resistance to change and create strategic opportunities for leaders to reimagine congregational life with fresh expectations and support. Notably, newer attendees are more likely to strongly agree that their congregation is willing to change compared to longer attendees, suggesting that openness to change may be reinforced or even expected by those who joined in the wake of the pandemic.

Ultimately, the pandemic served as both a catalyst for transformation and a reminder of how difficult lasting change can be. While the window of openness appears to have narrowed, the experience showed that even congregations rooted in long-standing traditions are capable of adaptation under the right conditions.

3.4. A Rise in Clergy Discontentment

Finally, a discussion of important changes in congregational life would be incomplete without acknowledging the toll the pandemic has taken on those leading congregations. Navigating prolonged uncertainty, adapting to new modes of ministry, and supporting congregants through crisis placed enormous burdens on the clergy. The fourth and final significant trend emerging from the EPIC data is high levels of loneliness and a rise in job dissatisfaction among clergy leaders.

Overall, clergy leaders are relatively healthy. They scored higher than the general public on the health and wellness measures developed by the Human Flourishing Program (VanderWeele 2017; Cowden et al. 2023). Not only did clergy leaders score higher on a composite wellness index, but they also outperformed the general public on nearly all of the individual indicators. However, the EPIC data reveal that clergy health and wellness are heavily shaped by the context in which they serve. Congregational factors such as conflict, reticence to change, and weak spiritual vitality negatively affect clergy well-being.

Despite strong aggregate wellness scores, including high levels of relational health specifically, a staggering 67% of clergy reported feeling sometimes or always lonely in the fall of 2023. This finding is striking, especially given clergy leaders' relational roles, and it mirrors the broader "loneliness epidemic" unfolding across the U.S. (Office of the Surgeon General 2023).

Loneliness is not the only sign of growing strain. Along the same lines, more clergy leaders in recent years have reported giving serious thought to wanting to leave their current congregation or the ministry profession altogether. In 2023, about 44% of clergy said they had thought about wanting to move to a new congregation, while 53% had thought about wanting to leave the profession entirely. These figures indicate a sharp increase from 2021, when 21% had thought about wanting to change congregations, and 37% had considered wanting to leave the ministry. While a pre-pandemic baseline is not available, these increases are substantial and signal growing frustration and fatigue among clergy leaders.

Importantly, it is not always the same clergy leaders having both types of departure thoughts. Some clergy leaders expressed having thoughts about wanting to leave their current congregation but remained committed to the ministry vocation, while others thought about wanting to exit the profession. EPIC findings show that thoughts of wanting to leave a particular congregation are primarily driven by congregational factors—such as ongoing conflict or emotional distance from the congregants. In contrast, thoughts of wanting to leave the profession are more complex and shaped by a broader mix of personal and contextual factors, including congregational resistance to needed change.

In summary, although clergy leaders exhibit high overall wellness, more leaders than ever are reconsidering their vocational decisions. The stress of leading through the pandemic, combined with persistent congregational challenges, appears to have taken a significant toll on some clergy leaders. These trends raise serious questions about long-term sustainability and support for those at the heart of congregational leadership.

4. Discussion

Taken together, the trends discussed here paint a multifaceted portrait of U.S. congregations today and how the pandemic reshaped religious organizations, not just personal religiosity. Many congregations entered the pandemic already facing significant challenges, including shifting societal norms such as declining interest among younger generations and aging participant bases. The global disruption exacerbated these vulnerabilities, affecting many congregations already in fragile states. In its aftermath, many congregations have faced both the intensification of pre-existing challenges and the emergence of new ones.

The results from national survey data show a continuation of the long-standing trend of declining worship service attendance. While attendance levels largely recovered from the immediate shock of the pandemic, they have resumed the broader, long-term pattern of decline seen before 2020. This indicates that the sharp drop in in-person service attendance due to the pandemic was not a permanent shift. Meanwhile, many congregations adopted online worship options during the pandemic, adaptations that most have chosen to sustain. However, the majority of congregations still prefer in-person attendance and have not fully invested in online worship to reach high-quality standards, viewing it more as a survival strategy than a long-term priority. Conversely, programming beyond worship has receded, at least for now. This may signal a weakening congregational vitality, as sustaining a robust presence becomes more difficult. Other markers of commitment to a congregation, such as volunteering and financial giving, have increased in recent years but remain below pre-pandemic levels or are insufficient to meet current demands. These increases may reflect efforts driven by desperation to preserve congregations rather than sustainable long-term engagement. Early in the pandemic, many congregations were quite willing to change, but that adaptability has since diminished. This could potentially create challenges for clergy leaders, especially when newer members expect continued change. Finally, while clergy leaders are overall fairly healthy, more than ever are reconsidering

their vocational paths. This could signal future leadership challenges for congregations as they move into the future.

These findings present challenges for clergy and lay leaders of congregations today. They must navigate evolving expectations for how worship is provided while addressing changing participant demographics. Leaders must also assess what programming is sustainable amid limited financial and volunteer resources. They are tasked with leading congregations that have proven they can change, yet now often resist doing so. Clergy leaders are managing all of this while many of their peers—and in some cases, they themselves—are questioning their future in ministry. Compounding these pressures, the ongoing trend of declining attendance may make it difficult to sustain full-time clergy positions, necessitate repurposing buildings, or prompt difficult conversations about merging or closing. Losing a full-time clergy position or other reductions in clergy support bring new complexities, such as negotiating hours and task prioritization. Sharing or renting facilities introduces challenges around financial agreements and facility management. Conversations around merging or closing often involve deep emotions and grief processes. Each of these challenges carries its own complexities, but collectively, they underscore the difficult realities congregations face in ministry among these profound changes.

The documented shifts in congregational dynamics post-pandemic raise important questions for clergy leaders, religious communities, and researchers to consider. For instance, many returning congregants are re-engaging with an organization that is not the same as it was pre-pandemic. What has changed and are these differences for the better? For newer congregants, there may be no preconceived notions of how the congregation was prior to 2020, prompting questions about how different expectations shape their experience. Additionally, the pandemic also revealed that, under pressure, many congregations could adapt in substantial ways—from launching online worship to experimenting with new ministry models. What would it take to foster that same openness to change without the catalyst of a global crisis? How might congregations cultivate a sustained culture of innovation rather than treating change as temporary or purely reactive to external forces? Finally, the well-being of clergy leaders remains a central concern. What kinds of support—spiritual, emotional, financial, institutional—are needed from congregations, denominational bodies, and wider networks to help clergy flourish? How can clergy combat isolation and vocational dissatisfaction in a rapidly evolving ministry landscape? And what skills, support, or training should be emphasized for both those preparing for ministry and those well into their careers?

Several important implications emerge from these findings. Churches and other religious congregations have historically served as a vital part of the social safety net in many communities. They did so by providing food, shelter, emotional support, and connection for numerous people. However, as congregations shrink in size, scale back programs, and struggle to adapt to a rapidly changing landscape, their capacity to continue fulfilling this role may be diminished. This is particularly concerning in a political environment where public social services are increasingly under threat. Congregations may not be able to absorb the fallout from reduced government support as they once did.

Additionally, the findings point to a widening gap between congregations and increased inequalities among them. New people are the future of organizational religion. In today's reality, these newcomers are more likely to be drawn to larger, better-resourced, and more adaptive congregations, while smaller congregations may continue to lose members and struggle to survive. This trend could deepen inequalities across the religious landscape.

Also, clergy and lay leaders are likely to face ongoing pressure as the scope of their responsibilities expands. Many are expected to juggle new technological demands, maintain aging facilities, manage shrinking volunteer pools, and respond to increasingly complex

pastoral needs, all with fewer resources. Without adequate support, this reality may exacerbate clergy burnout and impact long-term congregational sustainability.

The analysis presented in this article draws on the most recent EPIC data, the latest of which were collected in spring 2023. The next national EPIC survey, scheduled for the fall of 2025, will offer a valuable opportunity to examine how these dynamics continue to evolve with more temporal distance from the height of the pandemic. Future research will be able to assess whether congregations return to pre-pandemic baselines; persist along altered paths; or enter new, unforeseen patterns of change.

In conclusion, this article shows that the pandemic's impact on U.S. congregations is ongoing and multifaceted. Every aspect of congregational life—from patterns in worship attendance and participation to organizational adaptability and leadership well-being—has been shaped in some way by this global disruption, and the ripple effects are still felt in congregations years later. These trends carry real implications for congregational leaders who must continue to navigate a post-pandemic religious landscape that looks different from the one they led just a few years ago.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

EPIC	Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations
FACT	Faith and Communities Today

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Communication

Post-Pandemic Realities: How Will Churches Staff for Ministry in the Future?

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Abstract: The Religious Workforce Project is a Lilly Endowment-funded effort to map the nation's changing Christian religious landscape. A quantitative component identifies broad US trends, while our qualitative work focuses on Christian congregations in the Washington, DC metro area and surrounding counties, to understand how congregations staff to fulfill their missions, and to learn how congregational leaders understand the nature of their ministry today. In 2019–2022, we conducted case studies in 40 congregations in a variety of Christian traditions and contexts. For our analysis, we used a framework based on three societal trends that have impacted congregations: long-term member loss in churches, a skewed distribution in church attendance in which most people attend large churches while most churches are small, and a pandemic-induced movement from brick-and-mortar spaces to online spaces. This analysis revealed the consequential impacts of these three trends on congregations and their leaders, and some of the essential skills needed for effective church operation during this "wilderness moment," a liminal time in the life of the church. We see these impacts not only as responses to external pressures but also as signs of internal reimagining. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective strategies for church staffing and for preparing future congregational leaders that can adapt to the future needs of ministry.

Keywords: Christianity; church staffing; church ministry; qualitative study; interviews; pandemic impacts; Washington, DC; clergy leaders; liminal spaces

1. Introduction

The Religious Workforce Project was generously funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., whose goals included understanding how Christian congregations staff to fulfill their missions; the demographics of clergy leaders in congregational settings; and how clergy leaders understand the nature of their ministry today. The project began in 2019 and continued through June 2024, which included a generous one-year extension during a pandemic-induced hiatus.

The study included both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative component offers significant analyses of recent national data on characteristics of Christian congregations and their leaders. Our qualitative work focused on Christian congregations in the Washington, DC metro area and surrounding counties, because of proximity to the seminary that oversaw this project, to understand how they staff to fulfill their missions, and to learn how congregational leaders understand the nature of their ministry today. This paper analyzes data gathered from this more localized qualitative work and explores how churches are adapting their staffing models considering long-term decline, technological

change, and the ongoing effects of the pandemic. The other project goals are addressed in some of our other reports.

Although this qualitative project does not produce a national, representative sample, it is not our desire to generalize findings to all Christian congregations in the United States. Instead, it was our intention to provide in-depth reporting to the Lilly Foundation of what we observed happening across Christian traditions that may be signs of changes in the ways that congregations staff for ministry. We believe that our findings provide interesting insights that can jump-start important conversations about what churches (at national, regional, and local levels) should consider as they plan for how they prepare people for church leadership for staffing models in congregations.

In 2019 through 2022, we interviewed 41 congregational leaders from a variety of Christian traditions and contexts within the DC metro area and surrounding counties, participated in their worship and staff meetings, surveyed them on budgets and staffing, and analyzed their websites and Facebook pages.

Although we were also interested in understanding how clergy leaders come to be where they are and what they experience in their roles, our unit of analysis was the individual congregation. We strove to include diversity by church size (as measured by average weekly worship attendance), context (we were careful to include a mix of urban, suburban, and rural congregations), and tradition or denominational affiliation. Our sample ultimately included 40 congregations in a variety of traditions, including Roman Catholic, non-denominational, Evangelical Protestant, historically Black Protestant, and Mainline Protestant churches.

To explore how churches will staff for ministry in the future, we noted how the congregations in our study were currently staffed. We asked congregational leaders about their typical weekly responsibilities and the challenges they encounter, and we asked whom they would hire if they were given a blank check. We also asked them what they thought were the greatest challenges facing their congregations over the next few years.

This approach, coupled with our understanding of three major societal trends that affect the American Christian religious landscape, suggested some consequential impacts on congregations and their leaders, and revealed some essential skills needed for effective church operation today and in the next several years. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for (1) developing effective staffing strategies that can help congregations adapt to the future needs of ministry, and (2) helping theological seminaries and other institutions that prepare candidates for congregational ministry to plan for the near future.

To better understand the context in which these congregational changes are occurring, we turn first to the existing literature on church decline and size characteristics, as well as known impacts on clergy leaders and congregations from the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Three Societal Trends Affecting Congregations: A Review of the Literature

Three particularly important societal trends have led to dramatic long-term impacts in churches: (1) long-term church membership losses across all US religious traditions (Chaves 2017; Weems 2024a), which contributed to (2) a trend first identified by Mark Chaves in the late 20th century in which, of the Americans who attend church, most of them attend large churches, while most of the churches in this country are small churches (Chaves 2009); and (3) a gradual shift toward online business and organizational operations, greatly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We could have focused solely on the shift to online operations and what that meant for church ministry and how congregations staff for ministry, but it is hard to ignore these other societal trends that have also greatly impacted church ministry and staffing.

After we provide some background/context for these three trends, we will share how we observed them impacting the congregations in our study and how those congregational leaders believe their future staffing needs will be changing.

2.1. Trend #1: Long-Term Declining Membership and Attendance

Over the past several decades, researchers have documented significant changes in the American religious landscape. Chaves (2017) has written extensively about the long-term decline in church membership and attendance across nearly all Christian traditions. While this trend was initially most visible in Mainline Protestant churches from the 1970s through the early 2000s, more recent studies have shown similar patterns emerging in Catholic and Evangelical congregations as well. Tim Keller (2022) has noted the decline of Evangelicalism, pointing to broader cultural and institutional shifts that have reshaped the role of churches in public life. Lovett Weems noted that although several Mainline Protestant denominations experienced a short-lived membership plateau in the 1990s, after 2001, the decline has resumed, and he cites evidence from national congregational data that his team analyzed recently (Weems 2024a).

Although there is declining religious participation across Christian traditions in the United States and most Western societies today, it should be noted that many congregations are still growing; the Faith Communities Today (FACT) 2020 survey showed that about one third of US congregations are growing and vital (Thumma 2021). While most of the Mainline Protestant churches were shrinking, many of their larger congregations had achieved enough of a critical mass to maintain their membership or at least minimize their losses. At the same time, at least until the early 2000s, most Evangelical Protestant churches were still experiencing growth, and among the largest churches today, most are Evangelical Protestant, and most megachurches are continuing to grow (Bird and Thumma n.d.). This phenomenon continues to fuel a second societal trend affecting the US religious landscape.

2.2. Trend #2: Though Most US Congregations Are Small, Most Americans Who Attend a Church Attend a Large One

In an online article published in 2009, sociologist Mark Chaves shared that through his years of religious research, he had discovered a paradox: most churchgoers in the United States attend large churches, but most churches are small (Chaves 2009). This trend had been identified earlier in the National Congregations Study in which Chaves was the principal investigator (Chaves et al. 2021), but in 2009 he argued that this dynamic has important implications for how clergy are trained and deployed. He noted that many seminary students come from large congregations and may be unprepared for the realities of ministry in smaller, resource-constrained settings.

Since then, the National Congregations Study has consistently shown that while most congregations in the United States are small, most people who attend worship do so in larger congregations. In the 2018–2019 wave of the study, the median congregation had 70 regular participants, but the average attendee worshiped in a congregation with 360 participants (Chaves et al. 2021). This pattern has remained stable across multiple waves of the study and is echoed in other national surveys. The 2020 FACT survey found that approximately 70 percent of worshipers attend congregations with more than 250 in weekly attendance, while about 70 percent of congregations report fewer than 100 in weekly attendance (Thumma 2021).

This skewed distribution of worshipers has important implications for congregational life and staffing. Larger congregations are more likely to employ multiple clergy and specialized lay staff, while smaller congregations increasingly rely on part-time or bi-vocational pastors. According to the Religious Workforce Project, the percentage of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations with multiple clergy declined

from 15 percent in 2000 to 8 percent in 2018 (Kubichek and Weems 2024, p. 8). Similarly, in the United Methodist Church, fewer than 5 percent of congregations had multiple full-time clergy between 2000 and 2019, despite modest growth in the numbers of associate clergy during that period (Kubichek and Weems 2024).

The 2020 FACT survey found that 71 percent of congregations with 1500 or more in weekly attendance experienced growth in the five years prior to the survey (Thumma 2021). This trend suggests a continued consolidation of worshipers into fewer, larger congregations, even as the overall number of congregations declines. Unless there is a significant paradigm shift, this pattern is likely to persist.

One consequence of these two trends is a growing demand for part-time clergy leaders. Lovett Weems (2024b) has highlighted the increasing number of churches served by part-time clergy due to both financial pressures and changing expectations around pastoral leadership. Weems notes that these trends have led to a rethinking of traditional staffing models, particularly in smaller congregations where full-time clergy and support staff are no longer financially viable.

Another consequence of these trends may be that as future congregational leaders prepare for ministry, many will have come from larger congregations; however, because most congregations are small, the demand for new congregational leaders may be highest in small congregations, which newly ordained clergy may be ill-prepared to lead (Chaves 2009).

Before we further explore the implications of these long-term trends for church staffing, let us not overlook a more recent societal trend that has impacted congregations and how they staff for ministry: a technology shift that was slowly happening through the early 21st century but accelerated during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3. Trend #3: A General Movement to an Online Presence

It is well-known that the COVID-19 pandemic caused much of the United States (and much of the world) to change the way it operated beginning in early 2020, when most non-essential businesses were ordered to close their doors by local government officials in most states. This was a monumental event that lasted for at least several months, and possibly longer in some contexts, which we will hereafter refer to as the "great shut down." Those of us who were fortunate enough to have jobs that could be carried out remotely took our work home. Remote working became increasingly popular, and many new online businesses sprang up. Many brick-and-mortar businesses were permanently shuttered as shopping went online.

In early 2020, churches across the country were among those forced to close their doors and move worship and ministry online. This "great shut down" brought both disruption and innovation. Research from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found that many congregations adapted quickly, embracing hybrid worship models and expanding their digital presence (Thumma 2024c).

However, these adaptations also placed new burdens on clergy and staff, who were often required to take on unfamiliar technical and administrative responsibilities. In addition to these structural changes, the pandemic also intensified emotional and spiritual strain among clergy. A 2024 report from the Hartford Institute titled "I'm Exhausted All the Time" (Thumma 2024b) found that more than half of clergy surveyed had considered leaving ministry altogether. Many cited emotional exhaustion, increased administrative responsibilities, and a sense of isolation as contributing factors. These findings echo the experiences shared by clergy in our study, who described sleepless nights, moral distress over staff layoffs, and the challenge of sustaining community in a time of disconnection.

Other studies have explored how clergy have responded to these pressures through spiritual practices and intentional self-care. Research from the Duke Clergy Health Initiative, for example, has shown that practices such as mindfulness and structured rest can help clergy manage stress and maintain resilience (Duke Clergy Health Initiative 2017). These findings suggest that the future of church staffing may depend not only on financial and organizational strategies, but also on a renewed focus on the spiritual and emotional well-being of those who lead.

To understand the institutional and spiritual shifts that congregations experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we draw on the anthropological and theological concept of *liminality*. First introduced by Arnold van Gennep and later expanded by Victor Turner, liminality refers to a transitional phase in which individuals or communities are separated from a previous state but have not yet arrived at a new one. It is a space marked by uncertainty and disorientation, but also by the possibility of transformation (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969).

Turner emphasized that these periods are not only times of disruption. They are also moments when the usual structures of society are suspended, and a different kind of social relationship can emerge. He refers to this as *communitas*, a mode of connection marked by equality, mutuality, and shared purpose. Communitas arises when individuals are stripped of their usual roles and encounter one another not through status or hierarchy, but as whole persons (Turner 1969).

Claudia Schnugg's (2019) work on ArtScience collaboration offers a contemporary lens that deepens our understanding of liminal spaces. In her book, *Creating ArtScience Collaboration*, Schnugg explores how these "spaces in-between" allow for reflection, experimentation, and transformation. These liminal spaces are not just physical locations but cognitive and social environments where traditional roles and routines are suspended, enabling new ways of thinking and being.

This study builds on the extant body of research by offering a qualitative account of how Christian congregations in the Washington, DC metro area have experienced and responded to these trends. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, we explore how churches are adapting their staffing models in light of long-term decline, technological change, and the ongoing effects of the pandemic.

While these studies offer valuable insight into national trends and institutional challenges, our research focuses on how these dynamics are unfolding in specific congregational settings. The following section outlines our approach to gathering and analyzing data from churches in the Washington, DC metro area and surrounding counties.

3. Methods and Sampling

While the quantitative part of the Religious Workforce Project offered a broader context for our questions about the state of the U.S. Christian religious workforce, this qualitative phase of the research allowed for a "deep dive" exploration of a relatively small number of congregations, which helped us develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences of and staffing at each congregation through interviews with congregational leaders; investigation of each congregation's publicly available materials, such as church or denominational records and websites; and attendance at congregational services and meetings.

3.1. Sampling Frame and Procedure

To maximize sample diversity while still maintaining a degree of randomness, we attempted to create a random sample of 45 congregations stratified by the following:

1. Congregational size: measured in terms of average weekly attendance and categorized as either small (50 or fewer), medium (51–300), or large (more than 300); these three

size designations come from USA Churches.org (n.d.), but this size designation is a standard breakdown in the academic literature on churches;

2. Christian tradition (Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, historically Black Protestant, or Other Christian): the Other Christian category was intended to capture congregations that might be underrepresented in the other categories, such as independent churches and racial and ethnic minority congregations. With input from an advising team composed of well-published American sociologists of religion, we ultimately used this category to include a selection of Latino congregations. Some of these were Protestant and some were Catholic;
3. Setting (urban/suburban/rural): our method of designating the setting is described below).

Just as the primary challenge in drawing a national sample of congregations is the lack of a reliable, centralized list of all US congregations, that is also a barrier for drawing a Washington, DC-based sample. Online directories of churches are unreliable for rigorous research because not all congregations are included. We wanted to include independent churches, and we did not have the time to field a survey of a representative sample of DC-area residents. Therefore, we utilized a geographic-based sampling frame.

First, we drew a random sample of Census block groups (sub-units of Census tracts, each containing between 600 and 3000 people to approximate a neighborhood) in the greater Washington, DC metro area: five block groups from the city; five from the DC suburbs; and five from the nearest rural area. Our research team then used Google maps to identify all Christian congregations within each of these 15 Census block groups. These congregations were compiled into three lists: urban, suburban, and rural, based on their locations.

From these lists of congregations, we randomly drew congregations in threes—one urban, one suburban, and one rural—and slotted them by size and tradition into a matrix that allowed us to create a sample that was as diverse as possible in terms of the above-stated criteria (size and tradition, as well as location). As we reached out to these congregations, if they did not agree to participate in the study, we continued repeating the sampling process and, in this manner, recruited approximately 30 congregations.

At that point, there were more Mainline Protestant congregations in the sample than we had intended to include, and our sample contained few rural, Catholic, or Latino congregations. Realizing we needed another strategy, we returned to our trusted team of advisers, who suggested we try snowball sampling to target the missing demographic characteristics.

To accomplish this task, we hired a Spanish-speaking Catholic research assistant, who did a wonderful job of recruiting Spanish-speaking priests and pastors, conducted the interviews in Spanish, and then translated the transcripts into English so that the whole qualitative team could participate in the analyses. As each interview was completed, the researcher asked for recommendations of someone else who might be interviewed, which resulted in several additional churches being added to our sample.

Another team member found that when they were unable to reach anyone at a church, attending worship services provided them with the entrée needed to make a connection with the congregational leader, who sometimes consented to be interviewed at that time.

3.2. Sample Characteristics

Our sampling goal for this project was to find 45 congregations to participate, with the desired mix noted previously. Although we were initially able to convince 45 congregations to join the study, a few were unable to complete their interviews and were removed from the project. In total, we recruited 41 clergy leaders to be interviewed from 40 congregations (one of the congregations had a husband-and-wife copastor team).

Table 1 shows the breakdown of this final sample by size and tradition. The sample breakdown by geographic location is as follows: 22 were suburban, 12 urban, and 6 rural. Though this is not an optimal sample (we would have liked to see an even distribution of participating congregations by religious tradition, size, and geographic location), we felt that there was sufficient variation to feel comfortable with proceeding with our analyses.

Table 1. Characteristics of the final sample.

Religious Tradition	Small	Medium	Large	Total
Evangelical Protestant (17.5%)	4	1	2	7
Mainline Protestant (37.5%)	3	10	2	15
Historically Black Protestant (17.5%) [1]	3	3	1	7
Roman Catholic (7.5%) [2]	0	1	2	3
Latino (Catholic or Protestant—20%)	3	1	4	8
Totals	13	16	11	40

[1] Although 7 of the congregations in the study were in historically Black Protestant denominations, 11 of the congregations in this study were predominantly African American with a Black congregational leader. [2] Although we were only able to recruit 3 white or multi-cultural Catholic parishes for the study, an additional 4 Catholic parishes with Spanish-speaking leadership were included, for a total of 7; however, we categorized those 4 parishes as Latino.

In these congregations, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 41 pastors. We were also able to conduct worship observations in all those congregations and meeting observations in most of them. All but one had websites that we were able to examine, and most also provided access to budgets and job descriptions. Of the 40 participating congregations, 33 also completed a questionnaire, providing additional information about their staffing and budgets.

3.3. Fieldwork

Between 2019 and 2022 (with a one-year hiatus in 2020 due to the pandemic), we conducted in-depth interviews with 41 clergy leaders representing 40 congregations across a range of Christian traditions, including Roman Catholic, non-denominational, Evangelical Protestant, historically Black Protestant, and Mainline Protestant churches. Our sampling strategy was purposive, aiming to capture diversity in church size (as measured by average weekly worship attendance), geographic context (urban, suburban, and rural), and denominational affiliation. We also intentionally included Latino congregations and leaders and noted that bi-vocational clergy were underrepresented in our sample, largely due to scheduling challenges that prevented them from completing interviews.

Data collection included semi-structured interviews, participant observation in worship services and staff meetings, an online survey about budgets and staffing, and analyses of congregational websites and Facebook pages. Interviews explored weekly responsibilities, staffing structures, perceived challenges, and hypothetical staffing decisions if they were to be given a blank check. These conversations provided insight into how clergy leaders navigated the pandemic, challenges they faced, ministry staffing wish lists, and how they envision the future of ministry staffing in their congregations.

3.4. Analysis

A team of researchers, all trained in qualitative IRB protocols, collected and analyzed the data. We began our coding using NVivo software but transitioned to Dedoose as the project progressed, which made collaborative coding more accessible for the entire team.

We coded and child-coded the data iteratively, refining our codebook through weekly team meetings in which we discussed, debated, and clarified the meaning of each code. This process helped ensure inter-coder reliability and consistency across the dataset. We

continued coding until we reached thematic saturation and were able to answer the primary research questions guiding the study, as well as secondary questions that emerged from the data, such as impacts of the pandemic.

To support our analysis, we created a master spreadsheet that integrated data from interviews, observations, questionnaires, any documents provided by the churches, and online sources. This allowed us to build detailed profiles of each congregation and each clergy leader, including demographic, geographic, financial, and ministerial characteristics. The spreadsheet also helped us track trends in staffing, worship practices, and congregational challenges.

Conducting qualitative research across diverse Christian traditions required careful attention to language and context. Terms such as "deacon," "minister," or "ordination" carry different meanings across traditions, which affected how we coded and interpreted the data. To address this, we developed a glossary of terms and required all coders to consult it regularly. Our team's religious and cultural diversity enriched the analysis but also required ongoing communication to ensure shared understanding and accurate interpretation.

We were in some ways fortunate to have begun our study before the pandemic began, because it allowed us to peek inside the inner workings of quite a few congregations as they were emerging from the "great shut down," and making difficult decisions about their worship, ministries, and buildings. Although no one had yet heard of the COVID-19 virus when this project was in its infancy, as this project progressed, it became a salient topic of study whether we wanted to include it or not. In fact, we had to shut down our own project for a year, even after we had completed a number of interviews and recruited additional congregations for participation in the study.

When we were able to resume contact with these congregations, we were delighted to learn that, even in many smaller churches that were already struggling with low attendance and small budgets, congregational participation had continued and, in some cases, increased. In many cases, members increased their giving, and churches increased their community outreach services.

This observed trend was corroborated by a post-pandemic study (also funded by the Lilly Endowment) conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, "Exploring Pandemic Impacts on Churches" (EPIC), which found a trend of increased giving across the country (though the increased income of congregations has not kept pace with inflation) (Thumma 2024a).

In the next section, we provide details of the impacts we observed, not only from the pandemic, but also from long-term member losses in some of the congregations, and in the larger congregations, our observations about how they divide responsibilities among ministry staff members.

4. Findings: How We Observed These Societal Trends Impacting Congregations

Before we get into the impacts of these societal trends on staffing and on the congregational leaders in our study, we think it would be important to share how the congregations participating in our study fared overall during the pandemic. The churches in our qualitative study found resilience as they pivoted after the pandemic to re-think how they conducted worship, meetings, and educational activities. Most shifted to online services and virtual gatherings during the first year of the pandemic when restrictions prevented them from offering traditional in-person forms of worship.

During the "great shut down," many congregations provided some form of virtual worship, either via online streaming or recording the worship and uploading it to a website or a social media account. After they were able to return to their physical worship spaces,

many decided to offer both virtual and in-person worship, a term we often see referred to as "hybrid worship." This allowed them to continue to reach those who had newly joined (virtually) during the pandemic, while also returning to traditional worship as well.

Most of the congregations in our study plan to continue offering hybrid worship. This trend was also corroborated by a 2024 report from the EPIC project, which found that 75 percent of congregations now offer online or virtual worship and most plan to continue doing so in the future (Thumma 2024c).

Some congregations have continued to use innovation and technologies in ways we had not observed in previous, pre-pandemic research, such as the use of QR codes on screens during worship to send people to online giving sites; or providing downloadable apps for receiving tithes, offerings, and donations; using online chats and/or texting to communicate during worship; using radio broadcasts; using more types of social media; and collaborating with other churches to increase their ability to offer online worship, Bible study, and other services. These innovations have been difficult to execute, but in many cases have helped these churches expand their reach to attract and retain younger participants, the homebound, and friends and family members who live in other parts of the country.

Congregations that survived often *thrived*, and as we emerged from the "great shut-down," many of the clergy leaders we spoke with said that there was no way to go back to traditional ways of "being a church," as they had experienced membership growth from expanding their worship services, study groups, and other ministries via Zoom and live streaming.

St. John's United Church, a growing, medium-sized suburban Mainline Protestant church, received a grant to help them continue with their hybrid church model. This allowed them to install cameras and other equipment in the sanctuary, plus increase the hours of an administrative staff member to handle worship technology.

Alex, pastor at Open Hearts UMC, a large suburban congregation, talked about the mixed blessings of continuing to offer hybrid worship:

> *And then just the online piece. I mean, that's every church, but I'm trying to really embrace it where I know other pastors who are fighting it. And so I've really talked to my folks about, we are not going to shame people for being online for worship. In fact, that is a valid and fine way to worship. And so we can encourage it. And people actually like it. People are going, "Hey, I like this." I'm going, "Great. Then just worship that way. Come serve with us, come do other stuff in the community in person, but if you like worshiping online, God bless you."*

> *And then really trying to see how we form a really meaningful online community and how we prioritize that. . .Which means every [ministry] area has to be thinking about, "What are we doing next?" So it's almost like two different churches. I mean it kind of feels like old contemporary traditional services and I want to make it so we never have. . .like, these are in contrast with each other. . .but rather we're one church that. . .we do things differently. . .I think the mindset now is how do you be a full member [in the] life of our church when you [live far away and therefore] can't ever walk in the building? And I think it's possible but it definitely—you have to work at it and so that's—I think we need just as much focus on figuring that out and seeing who those people are who would prefer that.*

> *And it's not just about worship. We have these race classes as part of this social justice [education] and all of them want to remain on Zoom because—they picked up more people who can actually take the classes than if we were in person. And so I think it's*

> *across the board of how we're going to do worship—or how we're going to do church, so it's interesting.*

Some of the churches in our study returned to only offering in-person worship, especially Catholic parishes, because their theological beliefs encourage physically attending Mass. But many continued post-pandemic with hybrid worship, noting that for them, it was a pivotal moment. Annabelle, pastor at Trinity Lutheran, a medium-sized, growing suburban congregation, refers to it as a "wilderness moment":

> *We are very much in the chapter of—let me think about how I want to—It's almost the chapter of what's next, standing on the edge of the—still in the wilderness. I don't know. I have talked throughout the pandemic. Actually, not throughout the pandemic. The past couple of months, I have started talking to the congregation that I believe that we are in a "wilderness moment." There you go. That's what I call it, wilderness moment. I have been talking about how I believe that we are in a wilderness moment just as the people of Israel were in a wilderness moment long ago, that there is a strong pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that is leading us, but that we are going to a place that we do not yet know what it will look like, life coming out of the pandemic, into an intentionally hybrid church, into a church where you no longer have to live here to be a part of it, into a church that has taken the pandemic extremely seriously when your kid's soccer team has not. I think we are standing in the wilderness. And God has big things that are coming. But we can't yet see them. . .*
>
> *. . .So, a lot of my writing and my preaching and my talking right now is about, when you're in the wilderness, it's always easier to go back, and that it's always tempting to go back. And our human nature is to go back. And so, the leadership and I here have been talking a lot about how we're not going back. We're going forward. And that's scary. But that's our language. We talk a lot about that right now. Whether it's our worship times or our sacred programs that we're not coming back to, we are coming out of this to a different place. As a side note, one of the texts at my ordination was the Exodus passage. God could have led the people by the straight and narrow path of the Philistines. But they would have faced war and turned back. So, God led them. The phrase is, "the roundabout way of the wilderness." So yeah, that's where we are.*

Congregations like Annabelle's are reaching new people in other geographic locations that they would never have reached before. Would it make sense to suddenly exclude those new members? Of course not. Therefore, many congregations decided to continue offering hybrid worship services to include those who attend in person and those who attend virtually via live streaming or watching recordings. Many also continued to offer online study groups and committee meetings.

Hybrid worship and Internet-based communications require staff to be adept at both in-person and online ministry. Making the transition to hybrid worship often meant cross-training existing staff to handle various worship formats. The need for new skill sets in digital content creation, social media management, and online engagement became more prevalent. And they impacted church staff roles in a variety of ways: adding new technologies to the administrator role, adding new technology staff (paid or volunteer), and placing more burdens on clergy leaders (and to some extent, on other staff).

In this next section, we discuss what we believe have become the long-term impacts of these three societal trends for congregational staffing. We provide examples from the congregations in our study and how that affects their staffing models.

4.1. Impacts of These Societal Trends on Staffing for Ministry

Long-term decline has particularly affected the smaller, financially struggling churches in our study over the years, with budget cuts leading to reductions in staff or shifting of responsibilities among staff members. Many of these roles have been cut from full-time to part-time or eliminated entirely due to financial constraints, leaving some churches without adequate staff support. This section outlines the various ways we observed changes in staffing for ministry in the churches in our study.

4.1.1. Growing Demand for Part-Time Clergy

As noted earlier, many of the smaller congregations cannot afford to have full-time clergy leadership. As a result, a pattern has emerged among smaller congregations (those that started and remained small, as well as those that have shrunk over time): there is a growing need for part-time clergy (Lovett Weems 2024b). We observed this in some of our study congregations as well. A church might hire one part-time clergy leader or share them with one or more other congregations. Or they may join forces with another congregation to become a larger church that can consequently afford a full-time leader. Another option is hiring a specially trained lay person to provide leadership, though we did not observe any cases of that in the qualitative portion of our study, so we will not be discussing this option in this paper.

Within the qualitative component of our project, we did have a few cases to illustrate the trend of hiring part-time clergy leaders to replace full-time clergy leaders (Lovett Weems 2024b). Of the 41 clergy leaders we interviewed, 34 (about 83%) were full-time, paid positions. However, in one church, after our interviews were conducted, the full-time pastor left and a part-time pastor was hired. The other seven clergy leaders in our study were part-time.

Darryl, the part-time interim priest at St. Lawrence Episcopal Church, a small suburban congregation with an average attendance of about fifty people, is tired and ready to retire. He serves another part-time call in addition to this one and feels overwhelmed by the expectations of St. Lawrence's members. It does not help that the previous full-time priest probably did more than they should have done to keep things running, which left the congregation too dependent on their priests. They are actively seeking a part-time priest but are concerned that they will not find one who is willing to serve in a part-time role.

St. Lawrence also has a volunteer lay leader who currently does all the administrative work, but Darryl would also like to hire someone to do that work, noting that the current volunteer

> *. . .essentially functions as an administrative leader. She does all the bookkeeping, all the financial accounting, does things like oversee the building, manages the rental contracts, [and] prepares the bulletins. I mean, somebody needs to be hired to do all that stuff, or pieces of it need to be taken care of. Because it's like you can't rely on volunteers to do all of that stuff forever.*

Since we conducted the interviews, we have observed (via their website) a similar change at Westminster Presbyterian Church, another small suburban congregation. Bob, the former pastor whom we interviewed, was in his sixties, has since retired, and has been replaced with a part-time pastor who now serves two churches.

4.1.2. Staff Reductions or Status Changes

We noted that there was also a pattern of overall staffing reduction in many of the 40 churches in our study, primarily due to budget cuts after prolonged membership losses. The two most notable types of staffing reductions are replacing an outgoing associate pastor with a layperson or lay team (thus saving the congregation in salary and benefits costs but at the price of losing the expertise and experience of a trained clergy person) and replacing two or more specialist positions with one generalist.

1. Replacing an associate pastor with a layperson or lay team:

St. John's United Church was formed some time ago when two suburban Mainline Protestant churches merged. In the process, they sold one of the buildings and kept both pastors, but after a while with continued membership decline, they could only afford to keep one pastor, so a member of the congregation had stepped up to cover congregational care, in effect becoming an unpaid staff member. Her role "evolved into being an associate pastor," noted Bryan, the current pastor, "but untrained. Before she retired, they did start paying her." After her retirement, a committee was formed to take on the pastoral care, and Bryan is grateful for that, adding that "I got to come into a congregation that was used to doing pastoral care themselves."

Sometimes the staff transition has a very positive outcome, though. Grace Lutheran Church is still a large suburban church, but it is declining. Pastor Iain noted during our interview that they "have a phenomenal care team. The [associate] pastor who used to do our congregational care retired. . .And we brought on somebody who's a layperson, who's doing a wonderful job. . .And actually, the congregational care's gotten better."

2. Replacing two or more specialist positions with one part-time generalist:

Galilee UMC is a declining, medium-sized suburban United Methodist congregation with one pastor and several part-time staff persons. When Beth was appointed here, she was told that she would need to cut some staff. They had a full-time Christian education director whose hours were reduced to part-time, and whose role was changed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to become the tech person. That person had just left the staff when our interview with Pastor Beth was conducted.

The church had also previously employed a part-time congregational care person, who had left. They hired a new part-time staff person, who is able to preach, which takes some of the burden off Beth. But this new staff person's primary role is what they refer to as "nurture ministries," which includes pastoral care (or coordinating the volunteers who provide pastoral care). So, this new person serves as the Christian education director, an associate pastor, and a volunteer coordinator, but it is a part-time position. As Beth noted, the congregation is used to having staff do everything, and she is trying to help them through a culture shift in which more of the ministry is conducted by volunteer lay leaders.

Not all of the impacts of these trends are related to staff reductions, however. As noted earlier, many large congregations remain viable, and some are growing. This growth creates opportunities for these congregations to offer a more diverse variety of ministries, because they can afford to add ministry staff to plan and oversee them. We observe that they are often led by clergy and lay staff in specialized roles.

4.1.3. Creating Specialized Roles for Clergy in Larger Congregations

In lieu of having a more traditional ministry team that may have consisted of two or more generalist clergy leaders, with one of them as the "senior" in charge of the staff, the church's leadership, and the management of the staff and schedule, we saw teams of specialized ministry professionals in large congregations. When a church has multiple clergy roles, the trend we observed is to create specialized job descriptions that might include the following:

- A senior clergy leader, who preaches, sets the vision for the staff and church, and provides overall leadership;
- An executive clergy leader, who handles the operations and administrative functions and manages the staff;

- A youth/young adult clergy leader, who ministers to youth and/or young adults, organizes youth groups and events, oversees volunteers, and may organize and lead specialized worship for this age demographic;
- A worship clergy leader, who plans, leads, and coordinates the worship services, including the technology and music aspects.

Because most of the very large congregations are Evangelical Protestant, this trend seems more likely in the Evangelical traditions, particularly the role of "worship pastor," something we have not often seen in Mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations.

At Souls Harbor Baptist Church, a large suburban Black Baptist congregation, pastors (who may or may not be seminary-trained clergy leaders) are assigned to oversee volunteer teams who provide pastoral care. Pastor Claude explains how they are staffed for ministry:

> *We have a pastor on staff who's focused on ministry with men. We have another pastor who's focused on ministry with women. We have a pastor who focuses on the ministry of the children. And so those people, those pastors are the ones who are expected to lead the effort to minister to people in those different categories. But there is a team of non-paid staff, elders and deacons, who are a part of that team and are expected to help. But the pastor, himself or herself, doesn't have to do all the visitation, doesn't have to do all the praying, have to do all the—there are people who are sharing that responsibility.*

Iain, the pastor we introduced earlier who leads Grace Lutheran, a large Mainline Protestant church, prefers a worship style and format, as well as a staffing model, that more closely resemble those found in large Evangelical Protestant congregations. But it is hard to make that happen within his Mainline Protestant tradition: Iain feels that seminaries and music schools are *"turning out classically trained people"* who are not trained to lead worship that explores the *"breadth and depth of the musical experience of the Christian church."* He also feels that seminary students

> *. . .aren't being trained in the leadership arts necessary for congregational leadership. And this whole other universe of skill sets that are now really helpful, if not necessary, is just not even a part of the conversation. So there are creatives in all of these environments who are already doing this, dabbling and figuring stuff out, but they're doing it not because they're being encouraged to by the seminary faculties. . .*

. . .and so, he wonders where he would even look to find worship and music leaders to add to the church staff.

4.1.4. The Addition of Security Teams

Another interesting (and relatively new) role that we have observed is the security team, and it is not just in large urban churches. A 2020 article in *Christianity Today* noted that a Lifeway Research survey found that half of US churches now have armed security teams, and they are most likely to be in Evangelical Protestant settings (Earls 2020).

We observed this in our study as well. In Jeff's church, Mount Hope, a small rural, independent Evangelical Protestant church, the security team is armed with concealed carry weapons, wearing headsets, and guarding all the doors to the church. If someone they do not know is approaching, they will say this into their microphones, so that the person monitoring the cameras is sure to get a look at the person.

Pastor Jeff worries that (even though the security team tries to appear inconspicuous) it may hamper their ability to appear warm and welcoming as a church:

> *[The congregation] would say they're friendly; working on it. I think they think they're more friendly than they are, which is the norm. But they definitely don't get the idea of being overly gracious, not awful.*

> *But I mean, we have a security team that I've never had at another church. There are literally three men that have concealed carry weapons. And they've even got little headpieces. They look like they're greeting you at the door. But somebody's watching all of the cameras and saying, "Somebody we don't know is coming to door number one."*
>
> *And it was all in place before I got here. And it's actually pretty odd because the doors are locked. I mean, I know the door you walked in. There's another door where we have our handicapped people come in because it's closer, and they don't have to go upstairs. That's locked. And if there is not a security person there, they just have to wait until somebody comes and opens the door because they're so worried about security even though we're not in downtown Baltimore. I don't get it. So, there's a lot of things that would stop people from feeling, I think, super welcome when they come through the door.*

4.1.5. A Need for Church Staff to Have Technology Skills

Being the office administrator (typically a part-time or volunteer role in small churches today, from what we have observed) now requires technological skills for digital communications, in addition to traditional tasks. For example, an administrative office manager would previously have handled day-to-day operations and community outreach. Today's equivalent of that person, who likely only works part-time today if it is a smaller church (and most churches today are small), now must also manage the church's website, online newsletters, and the Facebook page where live streaming happens and/or worship recordings may be posted. Otherwise, they need to find a volunteer (or team of volunteers) who can handle these tasks.

When we interviewed clergy leaders, one question we asked was whom they would hire if we were able to give them a blank check. Brad, the associate pastor at First Presbyterian, a medium-sized suburban congregation, did not skip a beat with his reply:

> *So, we would hire a media person to do online stuff, whether that's a media or tech person, someone who can do websites. And then I think we would also hire someone to help us figure out our hybrid technology. How do we do this hybrid worship thing well?*

When a church could afford to do so, they may have added new staff roles such as technology director to assist with planning and overseeing hybrid worship. This person would typically oversee the worship technology team (paid and/or volunteer) who would handle worship planning, preparing slides and projecting them during worship, cameras, live streaming, recording, and editing. In addition, several hours each week may be spent in rehearsals to ensure that the various aspects of worship work together seamlessly.

Annabelle at Trinity Lutheran, which is the growing, medium-sized suburban congregation in a "wilderness moment" mentioned earlier, was able to add an audio and video producer for weekly worship during the pandemic. Pastor Marcus, who is a part-time, bi-vocational pastor at Pilgrim Baptist, a medium-sized urban church, hired a tech director and a media assistant. Pastor Clarence at Maranatha Baptist Church, a small urban congregation, hired a family member to help with technology. He explained that he felt fortunate to have someone available to step up quickly:

> *Well, with Zoom, one thing that we ended up doing was creating what we call a production team, which is our assistant minister, myself, and my daughter—who's [a college student]. . .So, she kind of helps to do stuff behind the scenes, so we were able to figure out that.*

The skill sets required for these people to take these roles often come with salary expectations that exceed what many churches can afford. Iain, whom we introduced earlier at Grace Lutheran, shared that it is frustrating to need a full-time tech person when you really cannot afford one:

> *We actually need a full-time person whose whole job can be organizing the media production. He doesn't have to do it all, but just catalyzing it, planning it out based on the church calendar and themes and then making sure people are recording and the pre-production stuff is happening. And then we can use, like if we don't have to have a sanctuary choir for [each campus] we can have one massive sanctuary choir, and whatever they produce together in either environment can be used in either environment for the glory of God. I mean, that's part of where this goes. It makes us stronger. There's no more "us versus them." We just have a phenomenal contemporary music band. That's one combined thing and combined choir and all of our worship. We're moving towards more of a hybrid worship style anyway. And, yeah, yeah, that's where this is going. And it would be wonderful to have one person—we need to have one person who's just riding herd on all of those pieces. And [this one part-time guy on our staff] has the ability. . .he has the ability to do that. . .I think we're growing that person in-house. We just can't afford him.*

Similarly, Pastor Troy, the solo pastor at Cornerstone Church, a small suburban, independent congregation that meets in a public school building, spoke of the need to add technology staff as their greatest current challenge:

> *Okay, we need an AV person like nuts, like crazy nuts. That would be the first person I would hire. In fact, we're trying to hire a part-time person; we can't find anybody. Our AV is a nightmare and it's overwhelming. We used to live stream. We're not live streaming now because we can't get on Facebook because the Wi-Fi in the school blocks it. So, we're desperate for AV.*

Some churches are "winging it" with volunteer technology teams. Mia is the full-time pastor at Faith Presbyterian, a medium-sized (and growing) suburban congregation. She has a paid administrative person to run the church office but is grateful that so many volunteers have stepped up to help with hybrid worship: "*The tech staff in the sanctuary, with going to hybrid worship, is mostly volunteers, pretty much all volunteers*."

Pastor Jerry at Canaan Baptist, a small urban congregation, talked about whom he would hire if he had the funds:

> *I think a young adult pastor, minister, savvy in digital media. Yeah. I think that would be the first. A close second would probably be someone with music, a music background. But yeah, I think we're pretty woeful when it comes to—I mean, we just got approval to do Zoom a month ago. All through COVID, we were—we've been using our cell phones for service, we've been using Facebook, but we haven't had that kind of technical expertise to guide us. So, someone with that kind of skill set would be a real blessing to us.*

Pastor Vernon has a similar wish list for Lighthouse Baptist Church, a medium-sized urban congregation: *"[I would] hire someone to do our audiovisual, cyber ministry. So, someone who could take control of the cyber ministry, and hire an outreach person to coordinate our outreach ministries."*

In some of the congregations in our study, to make room for hiring a technology person, a more traditional role was eliminated, reduced from full-time to part-time, or combined with some other role. If a congregation is fortunate, they have found someone to volunteer, or who is able to divide their time between two roles (for example, music leader and tech person). In some cases, though, the clergy leader has been required to add learning technology skills to their already overloaded list of responsibilities, which we will talk about in the next section.

4.2. These Societal Trends Have Created New Burdens for Clergy Leaders

Clergy leaders were already taking on added responsibilities before the pandemic due to membership losses, so going into the pandemic we were already seeing significant clergy burden and in many cases burnout throughout the United States (Thumma 2024b). Among the 40 congregations in our sample, a common theme emerged: clergy leaders are increasingly stepping into roles that were once filled by someone else—a retired senior clergy person, an associate clergy leader, administrative staff, volunteers, or specialized personnel. The pandemic added to this burden by requiring clergy leaders to acquire technology skills, provide more pastoral care and mental health counseling than before, take on additional administrative tasks, and engage more with their congregations and their surrounding communities. Many of the clergy leaders in our study did all of this while facing unusual emotional and mental stress and increased uncertainty about the future.

These added responsibilities, particularly in smaller congregations, alter the nature of pastoral work and contribute to higher workloads, stress, and, in some cases, burnout. Clergy leaders frequently reported that they now manage a range of duties, including office administration, community outreach, facilities oversight, and technological responsibilities. And sadly, in a few of the cases that we observed, consistent with Weems' findings (Lovett Weems 2024b), they do it all on a part-time salary or have a full-time job outside the church and receive a part-time salary or, in a few cases, no salary, from the church or churches they serve.

4.2.1. From Two Pastors to One

In a few of the congregations in our study, downsizing involved a decision to not replace a full-time clergy leader when they retired or left. Instead, the remaining clergy leader simply took on the work of two pastors. This type of transition saves the congregation money but places an undue burden on the now solo clergy leader, who may not have been prepared for such a transition.

This trend potentially signals a broader shift in pastoral roles, where clergy members, often trained primarily in theology and pastoral care, are now expected to juggle both spiritual and operational leadership. These additional responsibilities not only consume time but also place clergy leaders in the position of managing crises—such as unexpected repairs or emergencies—that were previously outside the scope of their role.

For example, Mia, whom we introduced earlier, had been the associate pastor at Faith Presbyterian, a medium-sized suburban congregation. When the senior pastor retired, the congregation decided not to replace him but keep Mia as a solo pastor. Transitioning to solo pastor has been hard for her:

> *[I was] the associate pastor for Christian Formation and Family Ministry. . .But it's changed a lot in the last three years or maybe even more. But naturally with COVID and the retirement of a long-term pastor, and just it being a smaller church, I pretty much have experienced it all. Which is, I guess, kind of unusual as an associate pastor. I've had to fire someone, I've had to—yeah. I've had a person leave in a way where they just dropped a bomb and walked away, kind of situation. I've done building renovations and emergency stuff. And yeah. All kinds of stuff.*

In Catholic parishes, it appears that the role of parochial vicar, which is an associate or second priest, may be disappearing. Father Antonio, whom we introduced earlier as the parish priest at Iglesia Catolica Santa Ana, was excited that they were able to have a parochial vicar. He noted that in recent years, that role has largely disappeared: *"I should say we're the only parish in this county, and for several parishes into the neighboring counties, that has a parochial vicar."*

According to Father Antonio, the only reason they have a parochial vicar is because they have a Latino ministry and their diocese has an exchange agreement with a diocese in another country in Central America to send a parochial vicar there, and to receive a parochial vicar to serve in a US parish at the same time. An additional burden for Father Antonio was that he had just been assigned to be the administrator for a neighboring parish that did not have a priest, in addition to his numerous responsibilities in his own parish.

4.2.2. Increased Administrative Work

In many smaller churches, clergy leaders now oversee office management duties such as scheduling, communication, and financial oversight—tasks that would have traditionally been handled by administrative staff. This shift often results in clergy leaders spending substantial amounts of time on tasks unrelated to spiritual leadership.

For example, Troy, whom we introduced earlier as the pastor at Cornerstone Church, a small, declining suburban independent Evangelical Protestant church, explained that they have downsized the staff, sold the building, and moved into a local public-school building for worship. He had been grateful for their full-time "ops director" associate, who had helped them through the process of selling and moving before he left to plant a new church. This left Troy in the role of solo pastor with the additional burden of administration, which he had not had to deal with before. He said it adds at least five hours a week to his already busy role.

But this loss of clergy leaders does not only affect small congregations. Souls Harbor Baptist Church, which we introduced earlier, is a large suburban multicultural church that is maintaining its membership numbers, though Claude, the senior lead pastor, says that member attendance and participation have been declining. After they recently lost an associate pastor, he has taken on too much of the work that should be carried out by committed church members. He shared the following:

> *I think at this point in time I'm too involved with administrative things, okay? We were working towards putting in place a structure that required less and less of me in the ministry and stuff. But I find, at this point, I'm still too involved and too many questions are still being asked of me. . .I want to get to a place where people are confident enough in their own decisions that they don't have to necessarily consult me as much as they do.*
>
> *And we did have an administrative pastor, but we [no] longer have one. And so I find myself once again taking care of stuff that he was taking care of, or at least he should have been taking care of. That's at the local—and I think even at the international level. I guess I need to work myself out of a job, so to speak. I don't [need] to be as involved, but I still find myself. . .being consulted on decisions that I believe they're capable of making. But we've got to work on that.*

Father Miguel, the solo priest at Iglesia Católica Santísimo Sacramento, a large suburban Catholic parish with an average weekly attendance of 1000, described how his responsibilities had expanded significantly upon assuming the role of pastor:

> *So now here I am the pastor. I'm the only priest. So obviously not only do I have to do the Masses and take care of the people and the groups, but now I have to take care of the finances. . .If something breaks, [people say,] "Hey, who's going to fix this? Who do we have to talk to?" So my role now has changed. I have to read a whole bunch of emails that they send me, and I have to be on top of that. So now there's a little bit more of the administrative part that I didn't have to do before.*

When asked if there was one thing he would change about his role, Father Miguel had a quick answer:

> *If I could change one thing about my work, I guess, I would love to do less of a desk job, less bulletin, the email. There's so many things that other people could do that they don't really require my help. . . .Things that really take a lot of time over your day. So, yeah, it would be great if I could kind of be able to delegate some of that to somebody else.*

Mary, the full-time solo pastor at Salem United Methodist Church, a medium-sized suburban congregation that has continued to shrink in recent years, worries about the congregation's future. She said that their lovely building feels like "a coat that's five times too large," and laments that they have had to make staff reductions:

> *I've lost my admin person—she used to be here five days a week. Now, she's here two. When I say "lost her," I certainly have lost her but—she can't do the level of minutia that I used to ask her to do. Some of that has come back to me. Some of that takes some of my time as well.*

During the pandemic, the burden on clergy leaders from past staff reductions was felt more strongly, noted Darryl, a part-time Episcopalian priest whom we introduced earlier. He had been brought in to replace a full-time priest, who had already assumed many of the administrative tasks due to staff reductions when she was there. Now Darryl's part-time role included the full-time administrative and spiritual tasks, plus additional burdens due to the pandemic, at a time when volunteers just did not come forward to help out:

> *And the pandemic has made it worse. I mean, because it's hard to spread out those jobs and get together to coordinate who's going to do what, and. . .the last priest we had, she was full-time and she just took over lots of the roles that would be volunteer roles. I mean, she did a lot of the Altar Guild stuff, she did the bulletins. When she left, there was nobody. It was like, we not only lost the priest, we lost a whole lot of things. And as I've taken on more and more to get us through—I mean, I think of it as just getting us through this time, but I know that at the end of this time, getting other people to jump in, and know what needs to be done, and to take on some of those roles, and many of our parishioners are getting older—I mean, there's only more things that are going to end up on my plate, not less.*

4.2.3. Increased Pressure for Clergy Leaders to Learn Technology Skills

In nearly all the congregations in our study, the rise of digital engagement, particularly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has placed another significant burden on clergy leaders. As churches have increasingly embraced online worship and virtual community engagement, clergy leaders have found themselves responsible not only for sermon delivery and congregational care, but also for managing and maintaining the digital infrastructure of their churches, unless they are fortunate enough to have a technology staff member to do it. And with the downsizing we have observed, only a few could afford to add a technology person to their staff.

Pastor Clarence, whom we introduced earlier at Maranatha Baptist Church, remembers when they had to suddenly close the church doors in 2020 and take their church services and meetings online:

> *It was scary, especially when we couldn't do the conference line. But then we had to turn that frown upside down and say, 'You know what? Both Jasmine and I work in the corporate world. We use Zoom for our business meetings, so, hey—Last night, we started using Zoom before a lot of other people did, because we did it in our regular corporate jobs. But then we just had to try to figure out how to massage it or to customize it, adjust it, because obviously, the way you do it at work is not how we do it now. Today you shared a document. So, we're used to just sharing documents but then when we share the actual videos and everybody's bandwidth was dropping, so we had to change it to say—okay,*

> *we're going to play this song and then Jasmine creates a PowerPoint scripture to show up so people can see. Then we have an older congregation that doesn't necessarily know how to dial into the computer, so we purchased the part where they can dial in by phone. So those are things that had to evolve. That's why we read the chats because not everybody is dialed in by the computer. So, we can incorporate the rest of the congregation; they can be on the phone but have the same experience because the worship leader is reading the chats.*

Mary, pastor at Salem UMC, whom we introduced earlier, talks about her typical week, which now includes the tech script for Sunday worship:

> *In the morning, I might do things, like begin to outline my sermon for the weekend. There's also the reading for the sermon. It's happening during the week. So let me say I might spend a couple of hours some day—it's usually not Tuesday; it's either Wednesday or Thursday—reading in more detail for the sermon. Just looking at and thinking about where I might go. And a lot of times, at that point, I have a general idea where I'm going, but it's still [undeveloped]. Okay. So, and then Friday, final approval of things, like the slides for something we do. We're not a church that has a screen. But when Zoom came into my life, slides became a part of my life, too. I also do a tech script that. . .I have to, just so that the people who are operating the magic while I'm trying to just preach and do that sort of thing are, "No. Okay, go here. Go there," that kind of stuff.*

Jeff, pastor at Mt. Hope, whom we also introduced earlier, shared that he had always wanted to learn more of the technologies for worship, and the COVID-19 pandemic kind of forced his hand. But it was a huge time-consuming thing to pick up at a time when everyone was already so tired:

> *. . .I had always had it on my list that I wanted to learn how to use Apple Movie Maker, one of the Apple programs that you used to create videos. And I could never find time. But guess what, there was time in COVID. And it needed to happen. And so to produce—I mean, I was preaching and producing, doing all the work for everything on Sunday to get out to everybody because you couldn't be with anybody else. So it would take 60 h a week to put a worship together.*
>
> *Now, of course, you weren't going anywhere else. So I guess it was okay. But it was frustrating because roadblock after roadblock—and it's kind of interesting. Frustrating goes hand-in-hand with—sometimes. It's also kind of exciting. Like I like getting to the root of a problem. And so it can be rewarding. But the fact that you have to put in so much time and so much effort to get to the root of the problem, to come up with a solution, it gets very frustrating after a while because if you're doing that, then you can't be doing all the other things. Then you're not visiting people. Then you don't have enough time to do all the worship prep.*

Iain, whom we introduced earlier, pointed out that he spends a lot of time doing what was a new term to us: "ministry production":

Iain: *. . ."probably another 25% of my time is spent in ministry production. And that's the right language now."*

Interviewer: *"Okay, right."*

Iain: *"Ministry production, so that's vlogging, communications."*

4.2.4. Increased Need for Engagement with the Congregation and Surrounding Community

Another area where we saw clergy leaders assuming greater responsibility was in the coordination of community outreach and social justice initiatives. As some churches in our study faced staffing reductions, clergy leaders were increasingly involved in running or directly managing mission projects, food banks, and local outreach efforts. This expansion of duties arises from a combination of reduced staff and heightened community needs,

placing additional pressure on clergy to take on roles typically filled by dedicated outreach coordinators or volunteers.

Such responsibilities, which include managing logistics, coordinating volunteers, and addressing unforeseen community needs, take up significant amounts of time and can divert the clergy leader's focus from primary ministerial functions, such as sermon preparation, spiritual counseling, and leadership. While outreach and social justice programs are central to many churches' missions, the increasing administrative and operational demands in these areas can overburden clergy.

Pastor Raul used to be a Catholic priest in South America but joined the Lutheran tradition when he arrived in the United States. He is the part-time pastor at Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey, a very small Latino congregation that is a ministry of a suburban ELCA congregation. Raul shared that he gets up very early three days a week to minister to local immigrants as they wait to see if they can find work for the day. Raul does it because it is a worthy cause and no one else is doing it in their community:

> *Basically three days a week I am at the parking lot at 5:30, 6:00 a.m. giving food and hot beverages all day. I'm doing summer, I'm giving them cold water. 6:00 a.m., I'm giving them cold water, t-shirts, hats for the sun, gloves for work. Sometimes as well—[he gestures at the sun and pauses, searching for the right word]. . .*
>
> Interviewer: *Umbrella?*
>
> *No, this cream.*
>
> *Sunscreen?*
>
> *Sunscreen.*
>
> Interviewer: *I see. I see. Yeah, it's a long day. . .That's a lot of dedication.*
>
> *It's worthy.*

Similarly, Pastor Lamont, who leads two small historically Black Protestant urban churches, which together comprise a half-time position, recognizes that the pastor is often called to go above and beyond:

> *So, in my context, at any given time, if you follow me, I'm the pastor. I change the light bulb. I take the garbage out. I answer the phone. I'm out in the community. So, we wear a lot of hats.*

Pastor Vernon, whom we introduced earlier at Lighthouse Baptist Church, a growing, large urban congregation, talked about their ministry to the unhoused, and despite the extra work, he feels the intangible rewards of serving the community in this way:

> *From this past week. . .we have a young man, and this young man has been homeless for a year. [This] same time last year he was sleeping [in the park]. He talked about how the wind would blow him—the trash can blow upon him and hit him in the head. And so he was just tired of it. He's been homeless for the past year. We've been working with him, [through our local homeless ministry]. And just last Friday, he finally moved into his own place. So we've been able to put him in a residence and I rented a U-Haul yesterday, went to a member's house. They had a bed, they had a table, they had chairs. My back is still sore, but helping this man who was formerly homeless [was priceless]. We put the bed in their living room. They told me, "Pastor, haven't slept on a mattress in over a year." Satisfying knowing that through hard work of the church we're able to help someone who sees no hope; now they have their own place and they can lay their head down on a mattress and on a pillow and see he looks much better. . .So the tangible work of helping other people. . .in the community where I am to find [them] shelter, to find food, that's always very satisfying because you see the transformation.*

And Pastor Jeff, whom we introduced earlier, shared that at Mt. Hope, a small rural independent congregation, the congregation is not willing to reach out to the community, so it falls on the staff to see it through:

> *We're trying to reach the community, that means the pastors and maybe a couple of the leadership. But the rest of the church, they don't really care about reaching the community. They kind of say they do. But really putting effort into it, it's really between the associate pastor, and myself, and her family. We're making things happen right now to try to reach the community.*

For some, the pandemic "shut down" led to increased ministry activity to keep the congregation connected, which also added to the clergy leader's burden. For example, at Principe de la Paz (Iglesia Luterana), a suburban Lutheran congregation with a small Latino-embedded ministry, Pastor Maria, who serves full time, told us about extra activities they were doing to stay connected because of the pandemic, and how exhausting it can be to keep coming up with new content for parishioners on top of other responsibilities:

> *The only two important activities we are doing are prayer and Bible studies, at the moment. Everything changed with the pandemic, and we have activities that are, we are told to tell you, temporary. Like right now during Lent, we decided to have forty days of prayer, and we have been gathering a group at 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning to pray in the sanctuary. And another group connected by Zoom at night. Twenty of those days I also did Lenten devotionals that I posted on Facebook, but, in the end they were very difficult to do because I was already very exhausted. I decided that we are going to focus on the two prayer services where I also do Lectio Divina. Because it is not only prayer, but reflection in the word, and we pray as a team. So, preparing that every day for both groups are things that happen from time to time.*
>
> *But that time just had never been as long as forty days as this time. . .I mean, we do these things; we do Bible studies just for women; we have had studies just for married couples. So, we have these seasonal activities and they're not permanent.*

In several cases, we noticed that congregations had been pooling resources with community organizations or other congregations during the height of the pandemic to meet community needs for food, shelter, and other resources. Nikki, who co-leads Hope Collaborative Church with Lamont (whom we introduced earlier), also leads another small urban congregation, Memorial UMC:

> *On Wednesdays, we serve the community [surrounding Memorial UMC]. We have community meals, from 12:00 to 1:30. . .And we have a clothing closet upstairs and a pantry. And what we do is we try to make sure we have dialogue. Sometimes we plan to have dialogue or resources from the community come in and talk to the community that's eating. We feed probably about 40 to 50 on Wednesday. And we call it a community meal because we don't want to say we're feeding the homeless. We want to make sure we're intentional about making sure everyone has a safe spot and not marginalized in any way. So we have a community meal. So in that meal, police officers, postal workers, contractors show up; anyone that's in there, unhoused people, everybody comes and eats. And we have partnered up with the National Church Campus Kitchens because they had so much resources they could give it away. So we worked with them so they provided the food and we served.*

4.2.5. Increased Demand for Pastoral Care and Mental Health Counseling

Annabelle, whom we introduced earlier, is the pastor at Trinity Lutheran, a growing, medium-sized suburban church. She shared that she wished she had received more training in pastoral care during her preparation for ministry and for the pandemic:

> *And right now, in the work that I'm doing now in mental health, I would have been far better with a couple semesters in basic psychology, mental health, crisis management, those kinds of things. The Bible's nice. The Bible stuff is nice. I like the Bible. I mean, I became a pastor, right? I get excited about that. But that's not where people's current needs are.*

During the pandemic, those who had already felt adept in this area still reported feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of people who needed additional pastoral care at a time when they were already facing personal burdens. Father Matteo, the solo priest at St. Gabriel Catholic Church, a large urban congregation, explained this additional burden:

> *Many members of my family have been sick, and then a lot of people that I know have asked me to attend to them as well, just for whatever reason. Right now, for example, I'm going to visit this young man who is dying. I don't know what's going on with their parish, but when someone's dying you don't have time to tell them: "Go to your parish." It's the time to be present and help them with what's necessary. And I have them as well on top of my daily activities here in the parish.*

4.2.6. Clergy Leaders Are Taking on the Added Burden of Facilities Management

Clergy leaders, especially those serving smaller congregations, are often responsible for the management and maintenance of church facilities. This includes overseeing building repairs, coordinating maintenance schedules, and even ensuring safety and security protocols are followed. These duties, traditionally assigned to facilities managers or specialized staff, often fall to clergy members in smaller congregations who are already stretched thin by other administrative tasks.

Annabelle, the senior pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church, described earlier, shared with us that she found facilities management to be a real issue:

> *I joked that I felt called to be a pastor before I knew what pastors did all day. And while you spent the morning with the cancer committee, I spent the morning with a plumber discussing the finer points of urinals. . .he. . .handed me a flashlight and said, "Look down this urinal and then describe to me [what you see] in graphic detail." No.*

And while Annabelle's story may seem funny to us, it is a common story. Monica, the associate pastor at Iglesia Episcopal San Cristobal, a Latino ministry within a large suburban Episcopal congregation, shared this quip: "*Well, I think—this is less me and more my rector, but she gets pulled into really mundane things, like how the toilet paper dispensers are working. You know"? [laughter].*

But all bathroom humor aside, taking care of an older church building can be serious business as well, as we learned from Father Matthew, who leads Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, a medium-sized and shrinking rural parish. Fr. Matthew shared his frustration at having to maintain a building and be in charge of. . .well. . .everything. And these high expectations of him come with very little help from staff:

> *One of the biggest frustrations I think of a small staff and of a pastor who's running a church and a mission is the facilities. And so right away, you are given the keys to the kingdom and you're in charge of everything. You have to know to make decisions and get contracts reviewed and you have a lot of phone calls with contractors and businesses to get them to come and look at stuff and all that. So right away, one of the frustrating things is that you are understaffed when it comes to facilities and maintenance. So, you're kind of hands-on. You can be hands-on so that the facility goes according to the code, or you can let it go. But you don't really have an option because you need it to be clean and you need it to be maintained. So that's kind of frustrating.*

Elizabeth, pastor of Holy Cross, a medium-sized urban Mainline Protestant congregation, did not speak directly to the issue of being expected to handle the building maintenance, as much as the social pressure to make it a priority in her role as a church pastor. Holy Cross is located in a historic neighborhood in Washington, DC, and has a rich history of social justice ministry in the neighborhood. Elizabeth feels a lot of pressure to preserve and maintain the building because of its historic significance. She came to this church not understanding that being the pastor of a church in that kind of setting would come with expectations from not only the church and its members, but also from the community. She noted that *"when you have a historic building. . .I think that there has to be preparation for what that means; it's one of your biggest assets."*

4.2.7. Increased Emotional Burden on Clergy Leaders

The pandemic was a very stressful time for everyone, and in some cases, the additional burden it placed on clergy leaders deeply affected their mental health. One of the clergy leaders we interviewed was Annabelle, the Lutheran pastor whom we introduced earlier. When asked, "What do you wish others in the congregation knew about your work?" Her reply was as follows:

> *How much sleep I lose over them. My care for these people runs deep. Their care for me and my family I also believe runs deep, but I lose a lot of sleep. I toss and turn over them, over their problems, their challenges. But I know what's happening in their life over this church that I feel I have been entrusted to faithfully run financially well and staff while I lose a lot of sleep. I wish they realized that.*

Father Diego, solo clergy leader at Iglesia Catolica Santa Maria de la Paz, a large urban Catholic parish, lamented that the administrative work is emotionally difficult, and the pandemic made that even harder:

> *The responsibilities are always to take care of the staff. Many of them are parishioners, and they worship here. It's not easy to kind of reconcile, but I see them as brothers and sisters. And at the beginning it was hard with the pandemic. I have to let go of some people. And also the work of administration, to judge, to see who is feeling to be here, too, and also to each one of them, it's not easy to handle people when you have a responsibility. . .yeah human resources. When you have responsibility over them, when they are wondering what will be their salary, what will be these things. . .I was not trained to fire people. I was not trained to fire someone.*

4.2.8. An Uncertainty About the Future

Returning to Pastor Iain at Grace Lutheran, we observe how he laments that, although they got through the pandemic and learned how to produce hybrid ministry, the hard truth is that the congregation is still declining, their income is still dropping, and they will not be able to sustain it for long unless something drastically changes:

> *None of us [had] the skill sets necessary for doing the kind of ministry this moment is calling for. We don't know how to be on television. We don't know how to be on digital devices. We don't know how to speak to a screen. We're still trying to fit ourselves into a pre-COVID box and just add some digital elements on top of it, rather than realizing that the environment calls for a whole different way of inhabiting the space.*
>
> *So I actually feel between myself and the team that I put together, we're actually staffed for that, but I don't know given the vector of the giving of the church that we're going to be able to sustain this work past that. That the congregation is going to, it likes its outreach and it likes its buildings. And so when does everybody have to start taking pay*

> *cuts? And when does the incredibly gifted team that we've put together, when does this become a dead-end option for them?*

Pastor Iain is not alone. Mia, whom we introduced earlier, pointed out that after the pandemic, it seems that everyone is burned out, not just clergy leaders, and this makes her wonder who will fill the lay leadership roles in her church in the future:

> *I also think this is COVID-related, but burnout is just so high, and I know most churches are struggling to find people to fill leadership roles right now because everybody is just so exhausted, so especially in a smaller church. . .It's always hard to find people to fill leadership roles because so many leaders are already tapped in.*

4.3. Additional Burdens on Other Staff

Besides the increased demands we have observed on clergy leaders, we also found those in more traditional roles (such as administrative staff, children's and youth ministry staff, music staff, and other ministry area staff), often needed to pick up some new technology skills. But even when they did not, they still needed to know how to speak the language of and use the technology embraced by their constituents, which in today's pandemic-influenced culture has become more important than ever before.

Pastor Troy, whom we introduced earlier, leads Cornerstone, a small suburban independent church. He shared how hard it has been on the staff. As we mentioned earlier, they meet in a local public school, so every weekend they must set up their worship space and then, after Sunday service, take it all apart and put it back in storage. The pandemic made it feel even more exhausting because they had to add recording and streaming to their roles, and it involved the whole staff:

> *COVID changed everybody's job. I mean, you had to become a recording artist. Or you had to pick up editing. So. . .some of that impacted me. Not so much as my staff, honestly. But we are sick and tired of it because we don't own a building. We spent so much time these last two years preparing for a Sunday, it's ridiculous. So that has been complete COVID exhaustion for us.*

4.4. The Need for Volunteers to Step up

In nondenominational, Evangelical Protestant, and Mainline Protestant churches, we observed that pastors and other paid staff are typically in charge of making ministries happen, such as pastoral care and Christian education. However, they are trying to get church members more involved in ministry.

For example, at Galilee UMC, a medium-sized suburban (and shrinking) church, Pastor Beth, whom we introduced earlier, would like to see a shift take place so that volunteers take charge. She notes that *"the culture here at [Galilee] is we have a staff and they do these things. And I come from a place of a lot of people wearing a lot of hats. And this is a culture shift that we're going through. . ."*

Iglesia Catolica Santísimo Sacramento is a large, growing suburban multi-ethnic Catholic parish with average weekly attendance of about 1000. Yet, they only have one full-time priest and a janitor on their paid staff, and a volunteer office administrator. Father Miguel is frustrated at this:

> *So, obviously this is considered a poor parish kind of thing. So there will be a lot of things that you would like to do if you had a staff. But sometimes it's a problem because sometimes I have to go out, door rings, nobody picks it up. So I mean it's frustrating. Volunteers, sometimes you'd like volunteers to help out with something, CCD, or some kind of things and you don't have it. You don't have those kind of volunteers to help you, so. And this kind of thing sometimes it could become a little frustrating.*

5. Discussion: Implications of Our Findings

We situated this paper within a framework of three societal trends that have impacted the religious landscape and the way congregations are staffing for ministry today:

1. The US religious landscape began to change decades before the pandemic, marked by long-term trends of declining church attendance across various traditions.
2. This same shift has co-occurred with a religious landscape that is increasingly composed of mostly small congregations. However, most Americans who attend church still attend large churches, which means that many large churches are maintaining their numbers, and some are growing.
3. The advent of new technologies brought opportunities for churches to expand their outreach via websites, social media, recording worship services and sermons and sharing them on the Internet, and the use of Zoom meetings and live streaming worship services, to name a few. But many congregations had not taken advantage of these technologies prior to the pandemic.

The pandemic forced those congregations to improvise and find novel approaches to conduct worship services, day-to-day operations, and stay connected with members. Congregations that had already been using these technologies were able to adapt during the pandemic, but many others needed to pivot quickly without having the necessary technologies nor the skill sets to build and operate them. This created an urgent need for more specialized skills in communications and technology.

We observed a variety of consequences of long-term member loss and the various impacts from the pandemic. In this next section, we talk about their impacts on congregations and their leaders, and then we will discuss implications from all three of these trends for strategic staffing and preparing future leaders for congregational leadership.

5.1. Impacts on Congregations and Their Leaders

We observed that staffing patterns are changing as more congregations shrink. This decline has particularly affected smaller, financially struggling churches, leading to a reduction in staff members and consequently additional burdens on clergy leaders, staff, and volunteers among the church membership.

Those who lead small congregations must be ministry generalists, able to (literally) "do it all." Because many congregations can no longer afford full-time clergy leadership, a pattern that we observed among smaller congregations (those that started and remained small, as well as those that have shrunk over time) is a growing need for part-time clergy, which may take several forms. A church might do the following:

- hire one part-time clergy leader;
- share a full-time (or part-time) clergy leader with one or more other congregations;
- or merge with another congregation to become a large church that can then pay a full-time leader.

In the larger congregations in our study, we noted different trends in how they staff for ministry. We saw a growing need for specialized ministry professionals for large congregations. They may be hired to serve part-time and have special training in areas such as communications and technology, music and worship leadership, community outreach or volunteer coordination. Sometimes one person is hired for two or more of these roles if they have those skill sets, and if the church has a budget for full-time staffing.

Adding specialist staff is often accompanied by cutting the hours of other staff members or eliminating their positions. The skill sets required for these positions often come with salary expectations that exceed what many churches can afford. Consequently, rather than adding technology staff, leaders in small congregations are more likely to figure out

the technology on their own. This places burdens on clergy leaders who have not been well-prepared for this shift.

Additionally, we noted that the clergy leaders in our study have been experiencing increased emotional burdens and time burdens due to the pandemic and its impacts.

5.2. Implications for Strategic Staffing and Preparation for Ministry

Understanding these dynamics is essential for churches to develop effective staffing strategies that can adapt to current and future ministry needs.

- If most congregations are small and need generalists who are able and willing to serve part-time, the conundrum is, where will those people come from?
- If it is true as noted by Chaves (2009) that more seminarians come from large congregations, how prepared will they be to take on part-time roles in small congregations?
- If most churches need more people to work with tech, which roles will be eliminated or reduced to make that affordable?
- If clergy leaders and/or volunteers end up doing the tech work, where do they learn how to do it?
- If churches need to have security teams, where do they find those people, and how can they afford to pay them? We see the alternative being volunteers who may not be properly trained for such a role, which could have disastrous consequences.

Churches must explore innovative solutions for human resource allocation, including developing or finding training programs for existing staff for a wide variety of roles. Developing partnerships within the community or with other congregations could also help share the costs of resources and expertise, ensuring more sustainable ministry practices. Although small congregations lack resources, they still have similar staffing needs, and it is a problem that needs to be addressed by thinking creatively about shared ministry, mergers, training for lay leaders, and so on.

We realize that seminaries and middle judicatory bodies of denominations are already aware of these trends, but if they have indeed been accelerated by the pandemic, we wonder what the impacts may be, as fewer churches will be seeking full-time clergy leaders, while there may be a shortage of congregational leaders with the technology knowhow to be effective leaders in this new post-pandemic era.

There is a concurrent desire for increasing volunteer staff, though in many cases the clergy leaders tell us that they are struggling to find people who will fill these roles as volunteers. However, we have also noted that in a few small-to-medium-sized churches, a lot of the ministry work is done by volunteers through small group ministries. In these settings, discipleship is emphasized so that people belonging to small groups are not only studying together and providing mutual support, but they are also recognizing their gifts for contributing to the overall ministry of the church and carrying out the programmatic activity that would be done by staff in larger churches. Middle governing bodies of churches and seminaries could be great sources of continuing education that is directed at discipleship and ministry training for the laity.

Inter-congregational collaboration can also offer relief for clergy leaders (who are often serving part-time) in small-church settings. Some smaller churches in our study banded together collaboratively to offer hybrid/online worship, Bible study groups, and other resources as a way to survive the pandemic when buildings were closed. This allowed their clergy leaders to share the load of writing and delivering sermons, which freed up time on their "off" weeks for more connectional ministries within their local communities and to provide more pastoral care to their own congregations. As a result, these small churches have become more vibrant communities, with larger numbers in worship and participating in other ministries than before the pandemic.

These findings illustrate the profound and multifaceted impact of long-term member loss and of the pandemic on congregational staffing, leadership, and ministry. As churches continue to navigate this new landscape, it is essential to consider not only what has changed, but also what these changes reveal about the deeper needs and possibilities for ministry in the years ahead.

6. Conclusions: Liminality in a Wilderness Moment

One of the most compelling themes that emerged from our interviews was the sense that the pandemic period represented a kind of wilderness experience for congregations. This was not a term used by all clergy leaders, but it was named explicitly by Annabelle, the pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church, who described her congregation as being in a "wilderness moment." Her language echoed a broader sentiment we heard across traditions and contexts. The pandemic disrupted nearly every aspect of congregational life, and in doing so, it separated churches from the institutional stability they had long relied upon. Worship spaces were closed. Familiar rhythms were interrupted. Clergy and lay leaders alike were forced to navigate unfamiliar terrain.

In this "wilderness" time, congregations were challenged to rediscover what was essential. Many clergy leaders spoke of exhaustion, uncertainty, and grief. Yet they also described moments of clarity and renewal. Some found that their congregations became more connected through online prayer gatherings and virtual Bible studies. Others noted that members stepped into new roles, offering support and leadership in ways that had not been seen before. The absence of physical gathering spaces did not mean the absence of community. In many cases, it led to a deeper attentiveness to the needs of others and to the presence of God in unexpected places.

This wilderness was not simply a time of loss. It was also a space of formation. Congregations learned what they could live without and what they could not. They experimented with new forms of worship and communication. They re-thought uses for their buildings to better serve their communities. They asked hard questions about their identity and purpose. For some, this led to a renewed sense of mission. For others, it raised concerns about sustainability and the future. But in nearly every case, it prompted reflection.

The stories shared in this study suggest that the wilderness is not only a place of hardship. It can also be a sacred space. It is a place where old assumptions are tested, where new practices are born, and where the voice of God may be heard more clearly. As one pastor put it, "We are not going back. We are going forward." This forward movement is not a return to what was, but a step into what might be. It is a journey shaped by what was learned in the wilderness and by the hope that something new is still possible.

In this study, we suggest that what at least one of the clergy leaders described as a "wilderness moment" can be understood as a liminal phase in the life of the church, to borrow from van Gennep (1960). The pandemic disrupted familiar patterns of worship, leadership, and community engagement. Congregations were no longer functioning as they had before, but they had not yet fully discerned what their future would look like. This in-between space, while unsettling, also created opportunities for reflection, experimentation, and renewal.

We observed congregations engaging in a kind of creative adaptation, or communitas (Turner 1969). They experimented with hybrid worship, restructured staff roles, and developed new forms of lay leadership. These were not only practical responses to crisis. They were also expressions of a deeper process of discernment and transformation. Turner noted that communitas often emerges in moments of crisis or transition, when the usual order is suspended, and new possibilities can be imagined (Turner 1969).

This resonates with the "wilderness moment" described by clergy in our study, where congregations, disrupted by the pandemic, found themselves in a threshold space. Schnugg's insights about "spaces in-between" (Claudia Schnugg 2019) help us see this not as a void, but as a generative space for reimagining ministry, leadership, and community life.

By framing the post-pandemic church as a liminal institution, we are able to see these changes not only as responses to external pressures but also as signs of internal reimagining. The wilderness, in this sense, is not a detour from the path of ministry. It is part of the journey itself. It is a space where old assumptions are questioned, new practices are tested, and the future of congregational life begins to take shape. As Turner observed, wisdom lies in finding the right relationship between structure and communitas, attending to the needs of the moment without clinging too tightly to either. Each has its place. The challenge is to know when to let one give way to the other (Turner 1969).

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Article

Yes, and: Expanding the Ways That American Protestant Congregations Respond to a Climate-Changed World

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Abstract: The impacts of the climate crisis compel congregations to reimagine their mission and identity in various ways. Working with data taken from U.S. clergy participating in an online program for education and support on climate and environmental issues, as well as selected congregational leaders from their congregations, this article examines the ways that ministers and their congregations in primarily North American mainline Protestant contexts frame the climate crisis and how those understandings both create tension and open space for new conversations about their Christian and congregational vocation. It also describes how these ministers and congregations engage with environmental issues through means beyond technological solutions and consumption choices, such as collaborating with other community organizations, hosting rituals for grieving or meaning-making, and inviting transformative encounters with the more-than-human world. Finally, it will suggest possible strategies for leaders and their congregations to frame and creatively engage with the environment through various methods.

Keywords: climate change; religion and environment; congregations; leadership; environmental justice; religious ecology; creation care

1. Introduction

In "The World is Not a Problem," British philosopher Hine (2023) describes the dilemma of environmentalists using ostensibly straightforward language that frequently obscures the contested, even contradictory frameworks behind them.

> Imagine you're out for a walk, and you come to a point where the path divides. The two paths will take you in quite different directions—there's a choice to be made—and at the fork, there stands a signpost. Only the words on each arm of the signpost are the same . . . When I say that I came to doubt the helpfulness of talking about climate change, it's because the signs that read 'taking climate change seriously' now point in such different directions.

This "confusing signposts" experience typified what our research uncovered about the substantially different ways that lay congregational leaders and clergy frame their understanding of what engaging with a climate-changed world looks like for them and their congregation. Their use of terms such as "care for creation," "environmental issues," or "climate change" concealed markedly different frameworks that defined both how they spoke about these issues and how they responded to them.

The frameworks behind these terms frequently reveal a narrow set of presuppositions that define a congregation's response primarily through technological solutions or consumption choices, such as recycling or installing solar panels. While these are both essential practices, our research points toward the transformative potential for congregations and leaders who can expand their range of responses beyond individual lifestyle choices or technology solutions. We have observed leaders in congregations sensitively and creatively envisioning broader ways for their congregations to engage with environmental issues in a climate-changed world. We suggest that the "yes, and" approach of affirming existing engagement with ecological issues while expanding and deepening a congregation's biblical, theological, and spiritual encounters with the natural world model a deeper and more sustainable approach to ministry that engages ecological justice and communal well-being.

This paper will first examine the contrasting frameworks that belie certain assumptions regarding frequently used terms in the environmental movement and describe the tensions and opportunities that present themselves when these differences are brought to light. Next, it will chart the wide range of ways congregations, and their pastors engage with environmental issues in a climate-changed world and describe the interventions that enable leaders to broaden their imaginations and bring new possibilities to life within their contexts. (For the purposes of this study, we define congregation as a group of people who meet to worship in a church building, online, or outdoors.)

2. Literature Review

Congregations can shape attitudes and actions related to justice issues (A. W. Harper 2020), including climate change and ecological stewardship (Nche 2020). Caring for God's creation is not just an ethical, socio-political, or practical issue but is deeply rooted in theological understandings of God, humanity, and creation (Yosua-Davis et al. 2025). There has been a "greening" movement in various Christian congregations, embracing environmental stewardship as a core aspect of their faith and integrating it into worship, education, and outreach programs (Brown et al. 2021). "Greening" has led to the development of eco-theologies that reimagine biblical texts to emphasize humanity's environmental responsibilities (Adler 2006; Köhrsen et al. 2022). Kearns (1996) discusses the possibility of a deep and meaningful reimagining of where humanity fits within the interconnected web of life. Accentuating ecological conservation as a fundamental aspect of Christian identity can enhance moral responsibility and increase involvement in environmental activities (Brown et al. 2021).

Discerning the meaning of "caring for God's Creation" is often eclipsed by congregations focusing on quick, practical actions such as waste reduction, energy conservation, and sustainable consumption practices (Kearns 2011). Frequently, congregations mobilize around low-stakes actions like recycling, replacing Styrofoam, composting, and changing light bulbs, while shying away from the more involved efforts of changing consumption habits and addressing climate change causes (Kearns 2011; Yosua-Davis et al. 2025). More involved "heavy lift" actions that congregations might engage in include installing solar panels and geothermal, joining clean-energy co-ops, cultivating community gardens, and advocating for political change with elected officials.

Religious groups have engaged in religiously motivated environmentalism and climate activism since it became a broad scientific concern in the 1970s, although their approaches and motivations vary significantly (Kearns 2007, 2011). Gazley et al. (2022) explain that 70 percent of charitable giving and 50 percent of volunteering are in response to disasters. Congregations often respond to symptoms (downstream effects) of ecological issues and climate change rather than underlying causes (upstream factors), highlighting a disconnect between awareness of environmental problems and a deeper understanding of the

systemic drivers of climate change (Yosua-Davis et al. 2025). The downstream effects are the consequences of environmental degradation, such as pollution, deforestation, climate change, and loss of biodiversity. Responding to downstream impacts of climate change, such as disaster relief, without addressing the upstream causes of global warming will, at best, have only temporary effects. Upstream influences include political, economic, and social activities, which are far from having an immediate and direct environmental impact. These upstream factors frequently involve policy decisions, business practices, and societal norms that drive pollution and resource consumption.

A congregation's capacity to engage in ecological initiatives is impacted by daily congregational life, and various factors can influence a congregation's willingness to address environmental issues, including theological interpretations, socioeconomic constraints, or competing priorities (Brown et al. 2021). Preachers often encounter challenges such as limited resources, declining attendance, conflicting political ideologies, competing priorities, time constraints, and aging membership, which can hinder their best intentions (Kearns 2011; Yosua-Davis et al. 2025). Ministers are also cognizant of balancing environmental concerns with their congregations' other pressing social and spiritual needs. Others face institutional barriers in addressing climate change, such as a lack of funds and human capital and limited structural leadership within collaborative networks (Nche 2020), indicating that, beyond theological considerations, practical limitations hinder effective action (Nche 2020).

Despite these challenges, clergy can shape congregational attitudes and behaviors toward environmental issues (Brown et al. 2021). Worshipers often trust their clergy to guide them on important matters, including environmental conservation, and those who attend congregations where ecological issues are discussed are more likely to recognize the reality and importance of climate change (Jones et al. 2014; Brown et al. 2021).

Many clergy view climate change as a moral and socio-political issue, emphasizing its effects on humanity and the imperative for action (Salter and Wilkinson 2023). The theological rethinking of how Christians relate to God and Creation involves more than merely adding environmental language (Kearns 1996). Preaching "green" sermons that "check the box" but are not part of a larger ecosystem of faith deeply rooted in a vocation of tending to our kinship with Creation can be shallow and not very effective (Abumoghli 2023). Denominational environmental offices (i.e., Green Chalice (Christian Church—Disciples of Christ)), Lutherans Restoring Creation (ELCA), and Evangelical Environmental Network), alongside interreligious environmental organizations (i.e., Interfaith Power and Light, Blessed Tomorrow, and Green Faith), tend to focus on celebrating houses of worship that make congregational changes and encourage individual consumption and lifestyle adjustments (downstream solutions). It is challenging, however, for clergy and congregations to undertake actions geared toward policy advocacy and political activism. Thus, "downstream" solutions do not address "upstream" decisions and policies for tackling environmental issues.

Cultivating a culture of environmental stewardship within congregations necessitates educating and empowering lay members (F. Harper 2011). Congregations can relate ecological issues to the specific contexts of their members and foster a sense of collective responsibility for caring for Creation (Golo and Yaro 2013). Some congregations have actively embraced environmental stewardship as a core aspect of their faith, integrating it into worship, education, and outreach programs. Worshipers who hear sermons about environmental conservation are more likely to view climate change as real and consider environmental conservation important (Jones et al. 2014; Brown et al. 2021). Therefore, fostering ecological ministry within congregations necessitates an integrated "yes, and" ap-

proach that combines theological grounding, education, practical action, spiritual practices, and community engagement to create a sustainable culture of care for Creation.

3. Materials and Methods

The context of this research is the EcoPreacher Cohort, a program of the BTS Center, Creation Justice Ministries, and Lexington Theological Seminary, which is currently funded by a five-year, $1.25 million grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., as part of their Compelling Preaching Initiative. The cohort creates a covenanted space for preachers to learn, reflect together, and support one another as they regularly preach in a climate-changed world. It consists of monthly online gatherings that include presentations from climate scientists, theologians, religious environmental activists, and homileticians, fostering community through small groups and opportunities for self-reflection and feedback on preaching strategies. The project also includes research funding to study how clergy and congregations are responding to the challenges of a climate-changed world and how the skills and resources provided by the program can be utilized throughout congregations.

Research for this cohort involved quantitative and qualitative methodologies to describe the lived context of the participants' ministries and more deeply understand their meaning-making processes regarding Christian vocation and the Earth. This included entrance and exit questionnaires for participants and leaders in their congregations, focus groups with EcoPreacher participants, and pre- and post-site visits with two congregations whose pastors were participating in the cohort. We decided to research both EcoPreacher participants and lay congregational leaders to have a broader lens to understand a congregation's context than simply the experience of their pastors. (For the purposes of this article, "participants" refer to all those who participated in the EcoPreacher cohort, "pastors" refer to all participants who were active clergy leaders in a congregation, and "congregational leaders" or "lay leaders" refer to lay members of congregations whose pastors participated in an EcoPreacher cohort.)

In all surveys, participants and congregational leaders were provided with the following definitions of terms:

- Climate change—shifts in global temperatures and weather patterns, particularly caused by human activity.
- Creation—a theological term used within a religious framework to denote that which is created by God; the term is capitalized in this survey.
- Ecology—the study of relationships between living organisms (plants, animals, bacteria, and humans).
- Environment—the totality of the surroundings that we live in, including climate; weather; ecosystems; biospheres; living species; and components such as rivers, mountains, air, etc.
- Environmental justice—the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.
- Nature—the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features of the earth.

This analysis is being conducted by a team of scholars with terminal degrees in their fields, including quantitative and qualitative social science methodology, congregations, ecology, and homiletics. This includes qualitative coding of open-response questions by two team members to increase inter-rater reliability, quantitative analysis of closed-response questions that looked both for broad patterns and tested for possible correlations between responses, and extensive field noting of both focus groups and site visits.

The 2022–2023 EcoPreacher participants, 93 of whom completed the intake questionnaire, were from 30 states, ranging in age from 23 to 74. In total, 81% were mainline Protestant. Overall, 90% were White, 56% female, 40% male, and 1% non-binary/self-described. Politically, they were 73% Democrat and 79% politically progressive. Twenty-seven completed both pre- and post-questionnaires.

A total of 172 lay congregational leaders from congregations whose pastors participated in this cohort responded to the intake questionnaire. They were from 30 congregations in 16 states, ranging in age from 18 to 83 years. In total, 93% were mainline Protestant. Overall, 90% were White, 63% were female, 34% were male, and 2% were non-binary/self-described. Politically, 68% were Democrats, 28% were moderate, 51% were progressive, and 7% were conservative. Twenty completed both intake and exit questionnaires.

One hundred and twenty preachers completed the 2024–2025 EcoPreacher intake questionnaire, which was conducted in September 2024. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents were from the U.S.; other countries represented were Cameroon, Canada, Nigeria, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Zimbabwe. The U.S. respondents came from thirty states. Regarding demographics, 70% identify as female, 26% as male, and 3% as nonbinary, transgender, or genderqueer. About 4 in 5 (78%) were White/Caucasian, 11% Black/African American, and 6% Hispanic or Latine/x/a/o. The rest (14%) included African National or African-Caribbean, American Indian/Native American/Indigenous, South Asian/Indian, Native Hawaiian or Alaskan, or other. Nearly all (97%) of the EcoPreacher participants were Christian. Also reported were Buddhist, Interfaith, Quaker, and Unitarian Universalist traditions. Eighty-two percent (99) reported a mainline Protestant faith heritage, 9% Evangelical (11), and 9% something else (11). Politically, most respondents were Democrat/Independent Lean Democrat (74%) and Progressive/Liberal (79%). Only 2% were Republican and Conservative.

EcoPreacher Congregational Leaders Intake Questionnaire respondents in 2024 numbered 219 from 45 congregations, with the majority in 24 states. Congregation leaders were White (91%), 7% Black, 2% African National, and 1% Hispanic or other. Regarding gender, 66% were female, 32% male, and 2% nonbinary. Politically, 72% identified as Democrat or Independent/Lean Democrat. Fifteen percent identified as Republican or Independent/Lean Republican; 13% identified as other. Just over half (53%) identified as progressive/liberal, 32% as moderate, 10% as conservative, and 5% as some other political identity.

4. Results

Results from our data collection of the 2022–2023 and 2024–2025 EcoPreacher participants and congregational leaders revealed the varying ways ministers and their congregations interpret the climate crisis. We discerned diverse ways congregations and their ministers respond to environmental challenges—not only through technology or consumer choices but also through collaborating with other community organizations, performing rituals for grief and meaning-making, and fostering transformative connections with the more-than-human world.

The 2022–2023 study: Conducting a comparative analysis of the open-ended question, "What does caring for God's Creation mean for you?" aided in exploring EcoPreacher participants' perspectives on caring for God's Creation. After completing the EcoPreacher study, the researchers contrasted pre-survey and exit-survey responses. The initial reaction of EcoPreacher participants and congregational leaders provided a baseline for evaluating the impact of the EcoPreacher experience.

Analysis of the pre-surveys for both EcoPreacher participants and congregational leaders provided a framework of caring perspectives: congregational, practical, and spiritual caring. Congregational caring themes included congregational actions, receptivity

to environmental care, and plans for integrating creation care into congregational life. Practical responses highlighted key action themes, such as sustainability, awareness, and acceptance of responsibility. Spiritual care included theological language, highlighting faith-based motivation, interconnectedness, and calling (Yosua-Davis et al. 2025).

The 2022–2023 EcoPreacher pre-survey responses initially focused on practical caring, such as recycling, conservation efforts, and environmental stewardship. There was an expressed concern for future generations and basic theological language mentioned through the well-being of God's creation. Congregational leader intake responses emphasized practical actions, like recycling, sustainability, and concern for future generations. Laity's pre-survey responses mentioned that spiritual motivations for caring for Creation were absent. The pilot cohort provided valuable data about the perspectives of clergy and lay leaders as we conducted the 2024–2025 EcoPreacher program.

4.1. Delineating Religious Environmental Engagement: How Clergy and Congregational Leaders Define "Care for Creation" in a Climate-Changed World

In intake questionnaires filled out by congregational leaders whose pastors were participating in the 2024–2025 EcoPreacher program, we once again asked, "In your own words, what does 'caring for God's Creation' mean for you, and what does it look like or involve for you and/or your congregation?" Congregational leaders (n = 214) framed their response to this question primarily in terms of individual virtuous actions (51%), at nearly twice the rate of any other response. These actions include buying less, recycling, composting, or reducing one's carbon footprint. They also named place-based actions (28%), such as installing geothermal in their buildings or "taking care of the land," and convening community partners (19%), especially by offering educational opportunities.

Notably, 16% of congregational respondents to this question could not offer a response with enough content to be given unique codes, with responses such as "leaving the place better than you found it" or "finding ways to take care of the environment," or by simply repeating back the framework of the question. In all, 9% of congregational leaders mentioned justice-focused responses, such as political advocacy, and only 5% of congregational leaders named spiritual/religious practice. One participant stated, "I care for creation; I'm not sure if God is involved."

Of those congregation leaders who also named why they were motivated to care for Creation (n = 72), 33% cited stewardship language that pointed to a hierarchical, if beneficent, relationship between humans and the rest of the world. While this theological understanding involved care, it did not always involve a critique of harmful political or economic systems. In the words of one congregational leader, "We are stewards and are to treat this earth as such. This in no way means that capitalism and progress should be resisted. Instead, we should look for ways where the economy and ecology intersect and develop those spheres." Secondarily, they framed their motivation because of their commitment to their faith (24%), taking individual responsibility for their actions (19%), or caring for future generations (17%).

In contrast, EcoPreacher participants (n = 114), many of whom were pastors in these congregations, articulated a far broader range of responses to this question. They framed their responses primarily in terms of spiritual/religious identity or practice (51%) This included a wide range of reactions: from actively working to shift people's worldview or values to leading communal ritual through preaching, worship, prayer, or confession to engaging with the theological resources of their tradition, in particular, the Christian understanding of hope.

The second most prominent response involved individual virtuous actions (47%), including consuming fewer resources or picking up trash, followed by place-based actions (42%), such as starting church gardens. They next named convening and equipping their

community (38%), especially by fostering collaboration among local organizations and seeking environmental justice (33%), especially for historically marginalized communities.

The primary source of motivation for these ministers was their relationship with Creation (76%), which they understood primarily through kinship (51%), a relationship with Creation that is reciprocal and non-hierarchical, or through stewardship (45%). As one participant shared,

> Caring for God's creation means seeing myself as an integral part of it. I am called to pay attention to, learn from, fall in love with, and live in a mutual relationship with all of it. Further, God has called humans to tend and care for more than humans. In this capacity, we are to draw from the perennial wisdom and science available to us to maintain our mutual relationship. My current role with the congregation I serve is to encourage others to fall in love with God's creation, to introduce a new cosmology, and to encourage greater awareness of our role in caring for God's creation.

4.2. Understanding and Expanding Competing Frameworks

Data from the 2022–2023 and 2024–2025 intake surveys revealed that many preachers experienced tension when preaching sermons addressing environmental issues. In both surveys, 45% reported that listeners were *occasionally* or *frequently* "suspicious and/or resistant" to sermons that addressed environmental issues. In total, 13–15% reported receiving "hostile" responses *occasionally* or *often.* These negative responses took the form of complaints to the congregation's governing board or denominational office (10%, 2022; 3%, 2024); refusal to speak to the preacher (6–7%); angry words, letters, or emails (4%); some threatening to withhold their financial giving (2–3%); or threats to remove the preacher from their position (2.5%, 2022; 0%, 2024).

Focus groups conducted with EcoPreacher participants provided a deeper reflection on these tensions, particularly regarding the contrasting ways of understanding environmental engagement. They named terms that could shut down conversation in their congregations. For example, one pastor observed that "to mention the climate crisis is a death knell." The term "ecopreacher" itself concerned some in another pastor's rural congregation, with one congregant expressing the fear that "ecopreacher" must mean "anti-farm." "I'm not getting rid of my cows!" this congregant pronounced, despite knowing that the pastor herself was a farmer.

For parishioners in an urban context, the tension around frameworks had less to do with perceived threats to family farms and more with confusion around perceived meanings of the term "environmental issues." For example, during a 2024 site visit conducted at Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, located in an urban African American neighborhood within Dayton, Ohio, a focus group with congregational leaders revealed a wide range of understandings about what constitutes an environmental issue. Some assumed that the term referred to concerns such as "saving the polar bears" or protecting faraway forests—matters that had little to do with their community. The effects of a local toxic waste site, a decades-old landfill, and a lack of access to healthcare and healthy, fresh food were constant concerns for them. When the researcher explained that these were also examples of environmental issues, the participants shifted their understanding. One noted the following:

> When I took the survey, I didn't know you were talking about what we're talking about right now [such as local environmental issues and health issues]. But what we are talking about here? Yes, 100%! We are all about this. The way your survey was worded wasn't clear. But this is the conversation that we have all the time in the church.

In other words, even the attempt to gauge people's attitudes about environmental issues in the congregation is complicated by perceptions of the meanings of specific terms. Thus, a word such as "ecopreacher" elicits negative feedback from a parishioner in a rural congregation, while "environmental issues" rings hollow for parishioners in an urban congregation. In both contexts, both the preachers and the researchers are learning that intentional conversation and education about these terms are necessary to obtain clarity and make distinctions, suggesting the possibility that there is, in fact, more common ground than may be initially realized.

In other cases, navigating these frameworks has led to discovering common ground. For example, EcoPreacher participants told stories about tears shed in shared grief about ecological devastation or how parishioners who thought they were isolated in their concerns for the environment could find each other once it was named by their preacher. One preacher shared how reframing care for Creation as something that involved humans (and not just different parts of nature) during a Graduation Sunday sermon reduced people's defensiveness. The preacher noted, "I had people who said, 'I always got mad when I heard about Creation care and the environment, but you put a different light on it."

Preachers also expressed how continued involvement with the EcoPreacher program appears to expand the possibilities for environmental engagement that they and their congregation could engage with from a place of shared mission and value.

5. Discussion

It is important to note that despite the competing frameworks, there is often a common commitment to care for the Earth from both congregational leaders and their ministers. However, this common commitment is not always evident to the ministers. For instance, when asked about the degree to which certain factors make parishioners eager to act on climate and environment, EcoPreacher participants significantly underestimated the environmental concerns of their parishioners. In the 2024–2025 EcoPreacher, for example, 64% of EcoPreacher participants said that concern for future generations greatly influenced their listeners. However, among congregant respondents, 80% rated high concern for future generations. Similarly, only 27% of EcoPreacher participants thought animals, plants, forests, beaches, or specific geographic places meant a great deal to their congregation, whereas 75% of congregational leaders were highly motivated to action by these concerns. The same held for "care for the future of the community I live in" (39% vs. 54%), teachings of their faith and sacred texts (25% vs. 49%), and intersections between climate/environment and other social justice issues (20% vs. 48%). These results suggest that congregation leaders care more about these issues than their ministers assume.

Thus, we were encouraged to see that EcoPreacher participants employed a wide range of strategies for expanding their congregations' understanding of engaging with the environment in a climate-changed world and in rooting it within the practice of their faith. The first was to raise awareness that different conceptual frameworks work in the congregation. Understanding, for instance, that environmental engagement could mean "anti-farm" created an opportunity for relationship building for the pastor mentioned above, who shared the following statement:

> We had conversations like, "Why would you think I would want you to get rid of your cows?" "Well, because those people always blame beef production." Someone else said, "Yeah, those people don't realize how much I do to take care of my land." I just stood there and listened because they were really sharing things that were painful for them and things that would stop them from hearing a message from me unless I couched it appropriately.

Similarly, during the Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church site visit, the researcher invited the pastor and the congregational leaders in the focus group to consider how "environmental issues" include what is happening in their local community. When asked if they thought the congregation would support a message about environmental issues if framed in a way that people could understand and relate to in their context, they all agreed. They emphasized, however, that it must all "tie back to Scripture," as a parishioner put it. "You've got to put it in their face and say, "This is what we're talking about. And then they need to put the scriptural foundation with it. Then, yes, we will be 100% behind it. The engagement will come when we do that." In other words, simply conversing about terms and their meanings can open up new possibilities for engagement.

Second, preachers shared the effectiveness of framing environmental issues within a place-based context and as a shared commitment to care for their common home. One participant articulated how this helped her start environmental conversations in her congregation, saying,

> The idea of trying to preserve the land and care for Creation, most of the time, has to focus less on climate justice-type issues and more on personal preservation-type issues, [like] "We can't lose so much land to sea rise, or you won't have a place to live." We can argue all day about what causes that or what policies need to be in place. But the reality is that that's happening, and they can see it, and so we can just have that kind of conversation.

Third, the EcoPreacher participants shared about the effectiveness of framing environmental engagement through the idioms of their religious tradition. They prioritized naming the importance of Creation within the biblical text, inviting people into a relationship with the more-than-human community surrounding them. As another participant articulated,

> I'm like, "Look, come in and see what this is." . . . What I want, because this is my vocation, is to make it so enriching, so compelling, to show the treasure of scripture for this, which I think could have such a wide impact, theologically, for people who aren't eco-activist believers of whatever kind.

A fourth strategy was to engage in spiritual practice through prayer and ritual. For instance, one pastor created a ritual response to her sermon in which people could either drop a message in a box labeled "hope" or dissolve (in a vessel of water) pieces of paper with words about "fears." This pastor noted how practical this approach was: "Absolutely everyone who was there came up. It was during sermon time, and we were kind of blown away at that because that doesn't always happen in a prayerful way, and it was very powerful."

Finally, the EcoPreacher participants articulated that cultivating community support and learning in peer groups for preachers is essential for leaders who wish to lead imaginatively and intentionally. As one of the 2022–2023 participants shared, she particularly appreciated the peer learning this offered her in the EcoPreacher, noting that other participants were "way ahead of me on certain parts of it. . . they know the language; they know their watershed. They're activists; they're planting trees, they're cleaning up the plastic, and all this kind of stuff. Which isn't necessarily my story. . . but it helps me see what's possible when it comes to activism."

6. Questions for Future Research

Four additional EcoPreacher cohorts will be involved in this program throughout the grant. Research will continue through site visits to monitor how these frameworks change over time, focus groups with participants, alumni, and congregational leaders, and additional intake and exit questionnaires. This study offers crucial information to fill

the knowledge gap in the literature regarding clergy and congregational environmental engagement. For example, the data acquired from the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 Eco-Preacher groups provided valuable insights and raised questions for further research, such as the following:

- How do geographic location and race/ethnicity impact how participants and congregational leaders respond to environmental issues?
- How do burnout, stress, and sustainability impact the capacity for clergy and congregations to engage with environmental issues?
- How do EcoPreacher participants and congregational leaders understand the concept of *hope*, and how do they engage with it?
- How is vocational and spiritual formation around environmental issues happening within the EcoPreacher program and in their congregations? What differences do we observe in formation among preachers and congregational leaders, and what opportunities might this point to?
- How do emotions around climate change or the future of one's congregation impact how one frames care of creation?

7. Conclusions

Our results indicate that the terminology of the environmental movement can frequently point in different, even contradictory, directions. Understanding what those signs are saying can lead congregations to discover a far wider range of pathways to guide their work than those they are currently pursuing. It attests to the possibilities and challenges for congregations that wish to expand their capacity to respond to a climate-changed world. Such work is frequently messy and sometimes risky. It requires creative perseverance within supportive communities that encourage, challenge, and catalyze preachers to engage from the imaginative richness of their traditions.

However, the creativity to transformationally respond to our current ecological crisis is already present among the practitioners who are thoughtfully and creatively responding to their contexts in various ways. In the words of the poet Berry (2012), "What we need is here." Our congregations do not need to create new responses ex nihilo: they already have everything they need to engage this current moment with a "Yes, and. . ." spirit of imagination and possibilities.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The 2022–2023 EcoPreacher Cohort Study began with consent to collect and publish data from clergy and lay leader participants (all 18+ and not a part of any vulnerable population groups). While there was institutional review from Lexington Theological Seminary and The BTS Center to ensure that consent was obtained and confidentiality was ensured, there was no formal IRB process because none of the institutions involved had IRBs. The 2024–2025 EcoPreacher Cohort Study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Concordia University (protocol code IRB-FY25-9, approved on 29 August 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to IRB restrictions to preserve subject anonymity.

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Article

Political Polarization and Christian Nationalism in Our Pews

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Abstract: Congregational leaders in the US must navigate a political landscape marked by increasing political polarization and a notable rise in support for ideas aligned with Christian nationalism. While gender, race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation have long shaped political lines, the US population has steadily become more entrenched in partisan political divides. Recent research shows the relationship between religious identity and willingness to use violence to support political and religious ideologies. These trends profoundly affect faith communities, challenging theological perspectives, social dynamics, and civic engagement. This paper examines how political polarization and Christian nationalist impulses within mainline Christian congregations impact congregational leadership. This study identifies key factors driving these changes through qualitative analysis of case studies and quantitative research. It explores their implications for community cohesion and the broader societal fabric. The findings suggest that while some communities experience heightened internal conflict and fragmentation, others adapt by engaging in dialogue, story-sharing, and education. The paper concludes with recommendations to counter political polarization and ideological extremism through increased understanding, nuanced theological reflection, and political awareness. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on congregational leadership and political engagement, highlighting the need for nuanced strategies to address the challenges of political polarization and Christian nationalism in the US today.

Keywords: Christian nationalism; politics; polarization; bridging; dialogue; political polarization violence; extremism; community cohesion; interfaith; cross-partisan engagement; faith-based initiatives; social cohesion

1. Introduction

As a community speaker on religion and politics, I frequently hear from local pastors navigating political discontent within their congregations. Recently, a pastor approached me for advice. One of her congregants had posted a political statement on Facebook, which the pastor disagreed with. At the end of the post, the congregant instructed anyone who disagreed to "unfriend" him. The pastor wasn't sure what to do. Should she approach the congregant or bracket the situation as "political noise?" According to the data, this pastor is not alone. The US population is incredibly divided on politics. According to Pew Research, the US population has steadily become more entrenched in partisan political divides (Pew Research Center 2024). Furthermore, recent research by the Public Religion Research Institute on Christian nationalism and support for authoritarian governments shows the relationship between religious identity and willingness to use violence to support political and religious ideologies (Public Religion Research Institute 2024). These trends profoundly affect faith communities, challenging theological perspectives, social dynamics, and civic engagement. This paper examines how political polarization and Christian nationalist impulses within mainline Christian churches impact congregational leadership, shaping

community cohesion and the broader societal fabric. Facing fraught political contexts, some communities experience heightened internal conflict and fragmentation, while others adapt by engaging in dialogue, story-sharing, and education. Drawing upon case studies from various projects addressing political polarization in the US, this paper introduces recommendations to further community cohesion, understanding across differences, nuanced theological reflection, and political awareness. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on congregational leadership and political engagement, highlighting the need for nuanced strategies to address the challenges of political polarization and Christian nationalism in the US today.

2. Politics in the Pews

Pew Research Center surveys show a marked increase in partisan hostility between 1994 and 2022. In 1994, 17% of Democrats surveyed had very unfavorable views of Republicans, and 21% of Republicans had very unfavorable views of Democrats (Pew Research Center 2023). By 2022, majorities of registered voters who identified with a major party (54% of Democrats and 62% of Republicans) viewed the other party very unfavorably. Partisans do not simply hold unfavorable views of the other party as a political organization; they also have negative opinions of members of the opposing party on various traits. For example, more than eight of ten (82%) Democrats said Republicans are more closed-minded than other Americans, and 72% of Republicans said Democrats were more dishonest and more immoral than other Americans (Pew Research Center 2024). The sentiment among Americans regarding the political system is notably bleak. According to a Pew survey, only 2% of participants described their feelings about politics positively, while a staggering 79% used negative descriptors, with "divisive" and "corrupt" frequently cited (Pew Research Center 2024). For many, political identities are no longer just viewpoints but integral facets of their self-concept. Voters not only hold differing political views but increasingly harbor animosity toward those of the opposing party (Black 2023, p. 38). Voters show increasing rigidity, or calcification, in their political loyalties, often intertwining their political affiliations with their racial, ethnic, or religious identities. Increasing political polarization increases the risk of extremist views and ideologies taking hold in the American public (Kleinfeld 2021).

Of particular concern is rising support for Christian nationalism and acceptance of the option of political violence. Christian nationalism, defined as a modern political movement that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic and political life, breaks from US constitutional precedent, upholding the US as a plural democracy. According to the Public Religion Research Institute's (PRRI) 2023 American Values Atlas research, roughly three in ten Americans qualify as what they classify as Christian Nationalism Adherents or Sympathizers, meaning respondents affirm statements aligning Christian values with US laws and culture (Public Religion Research Institute 2024). Put in relationship with the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWAS), PRRI showed that those who hold Christian nationalist and Right-Wing Authoritarian views are approximately twice as likely as the public to support political violence (Public Religion Research Institute 2024). Examples of political violence in the US can be seen most clearly in the attacks on the US Capitol on 6 October 2021, and in the assassination attempts on presidential candidate Donald Trump in the summer of 2024. One third of Christian nationalism Adherents and Sympathizers (33%) agree that "true American patriots may have to resort to violence to save our country", as do 28% of Americans who score high on the RWAS (Public Religion Research Institute 2024). This research shows a pattern of amplifying ethno-religious identities, positioning itself against perceived secularism and a more pluralistic society. As Samuel L. Perry posits, this reinforces and complicates America's partisan and ethnocultural divides at multiple

levels of analysis—from macro structures such as laws and policies to micro-level everyday interactions (Perry 2022, p. 89).

Political divisions intersect with several other social and political factors facing congregations. Faith communities operate in an environment of heightened uncertainty and accelerated changes in global culture, economy, and geopolitics. Despite recent reports of plateauing numbers, religious affiliation has rapidly declined over the past several decades (Pew Research Center 2025). The average American in the pews of Christian churches is significantly older than the average American across the entire population, creating compounding stress for congregational sustainability. While some cite the politicization of religion and the rise of the Religious Right for declining participation and affiliation, other studies show political engagement fueling individual congregational growth. Using data from the National Congregations Study, a representative sample of American congregations, Andre P. Audette and Christopher L. Weaver examined the impact of politicization on church membership rates at the congregational level (Audette and Weaver 2016, p. 246). They showed that more politically active congregations were more likely to see growth in membership over time. Using data from the General Social Survey, they offered evidence that partisans on both ends of the political spectrum are more likely to engage in religious switching than independents, suggesting that those joining new congregations may be politically motivated (Audette and Weaver 2016, p. 247). These data show that congregational demographics are transforming, marked by increased sorting based on political beliefs. As the landscape shifts, the traditional model of "purple churches", or those that blend liberal and conservative congregants, is becoming increasingly rare. Instead, more "red" (conservative) and "blue" (liberal) churches are emerging, resulting in fewer opportunities for dialogue across political lines (Audette and Weaver 2016, p. 249).

Clergy are in an increasingly precarious situation as they navigate congregation sustainability and increasingly partisan congregations where some seek expanded political participation, and others avoid political entanglement. Clergy stress is further exacerbated if their political views differ from most congregation members. Data from the National Survey of Religious Leaders reveals that clergy in more liberal denominations, such as some Catholic or white mainline Protestant churches, tend to diverge politically from their congregants, complicating their pastoral role (Chaves 2023). In contrast, clergy in Black Protestant and predominantly white Evangelical churches generally align politically with their congregations, reinforcing the idea that political beliefs significantly shape theological dialogues (Chaves 2023). Consequently, congregational leaders face the challenge of helping their communities engage across political divides in ways aligned with their core beliefs. This stress creates a desire for some clergy to leave ministry roles. According to a March 2022 study by the Barna Group, "current political divides" in congregations were among the top 3 reasons clergy leave full-time ministry (Barna Group 2022). PRRI's 2022–2023 Mainline Protestant Clergy Survey showed that serving a congregation that does not accept their political differences can affect clergy well-being (Public Religion Research Institute 2023). Among clergy who say their congregants are slightly or not accepting of their political differences, 50% report feeling emotionally drained from work every day or at least once a week, compared to 28% of clergy whose congregants are moderately or very accepting of their political differences (Public Religion Research Institute 2023). Moreover, among those clergy who say their congregants are slightly or not at all accepting of their political differences, 47% report feeling frustrated with their job every day or at least once a week, compared with 21% of clergy whose congregations are more accepting of their political differences (Public Religion Research Institute 2023).

Political polarization contributes to significant challenges not only to democratic processes but also to mental health, interpersonal relationships, and community cohesion.

As the ideological gap between political parties widens, legislative gridlock becomes more prevalent, stalling crucial policy development and governance. We can see this in School Board meetings that become hostile or City Council meetings that become overrun with protests (Mueller 2023). This divisiveness extends into social relationships, fostering hostility and mistrust among individuals with opposing political views, which strains familial and community bonds. Recent studies have shown that such a polarized atmosphere can elevate stress levels and anxiety, contributing to a decline in mental health for many (American Psychological Association 2024). Social media and news outlets, often acting as echo chambers, exacerbate these issues by perpetuating misinformation and reinforcing partisan biases, further entrenching divisions. As a result, individuals find it increasingly difficult to engage in civil discourse, leading to fractured relationships and a diminished sense of social cohesion. The rise in Christian nationalism and acceptance of violence creates a particular threat exacerbated by right-wing media and conspiracy theories that can quickly spread within congregation contexts. While religion is too often cited as a source of division, religious communities have long been a foundation for fostering connection and social cohesion (Cavendish 2023). In this moment of heightened political tension, congregations have a critical role in countering political polarization in the US.

3. Flipping the Script

After a decade of intense political fights and media-reinforcing divides, some in the US have resigned to silos based on political affiliation. Many clergy and congregations avoid topics seen as "political" out of fear of conflict. However, some data challenges the depth of these assumed divisions and creates pathways for congregations to embark on the vital work of addressing polarization. While Americans are indeed divided and increasingly so, as noted in the research above, they are not divided in every regard. According to recent research, much of the talk about cultural wars and polarization has been exaggerated (Baldassarri and Park 2020). Americans are consistently liberalizing and trending toward convergence on several important moral and social issues, including women's rights, racial equality, and expanded acceptance of same-gender marriage (Rieder and Steinlight 2004). Core values for most Americans remain rooted in human connection, belonging, and community thriving. The primary strategy shown to soften hardened political positions is proximity to a person or experience that challenges assumptions. Personal relationships and stories are the primary vehicle for countering stereotypes and breaking down barriers. Religious congregations can provide opportunities for transformative relationships, dialogue, and education that bring complexity to issues perceived as binary. Research highlights the potential of initiatives where structured discussions bring individuals from diverse political backgrounds together to engage in meaningful dialogue (Burgess et al. 2022). Educational programs emphasizing critical thinking and media literacy can equip citizens with the skills to analyze information objectively, reducing the impact of misinformation and biased media narratives (Tommasi et al. 2023). Congregations can collaborate to strengthen civic education and reinforce democratic principles and intergroup understanding. For example, three congregations came together in Denver, Colorado, to engage in an educational series to learn about the history of racism and its impacts on churches in the United States (https://www.montview.org/montviews-anti-racism-trust-team/, accessed on 25 March 2025). Upon completion, participants reported increased understanding and increased likelihood to support work to counter systemic racism. By implementing these strategies, congregations can bridge political divides and promote a more constructive political environment. The imperative to engage in the work of education, relationship-building, and community engagement is equally strong when congregations themselves

become more politically uniform. Without intentional engagement, congregations in a polarized America risk becoming yet another siloed echo chamber.

In the second half of this paper, I will explore three primary scenarios for congregations navigating the current rise in political volatility with a commitment to faithfulness to their core tenants and a shared interest in furthering a common good. While this is not a prescriptive project, I approach the research with a foundational rejection of violence and a position that sees the current move toward Christian nationalism as both an aberration of a Christian religious commitment and a breach of pluralist democracy in the United States. From this ground, I explore current tools for navigating internal political divides, utilizing resources to counter political polarization, and moving beyond the siloed congregation. While this paper primarily focuses on the impacts of polarization and Christian nationalism on Christian congregations in the US, examples from diverse religious traditions provide insights and tools to counter division. To do this, I will draw upon recent case studies developed by the More in Common Project, the Rebuilding Democracy Project, Essential Partners, the One America Movement, and the Mustard Seed Project.

4. Navigating Internal Political Divides

The opposite of polarization is not uniformity; disagreement and difference are positive practices to nurture and support. Journalist Amanda Ripley makes the distinction between "healthy conflict and high conflict—healthy conflict involves serious and intense friction but avoids collapsing into patterns of dehumanization" (Ripley 2021, pp. 6–7). In contrast, high conflict is characterized by all-consuming contempt and disgust, thus creating an "us-versus-them" mentality in which everyone ends up worse off. For congregations navigating polarization, an essential first step is to embrace the reality that people inherently hold divergent beliefs and have diverse experiences that shape political perspectives. The work of the More in Common Project shows that congregational leaders can help congregants become more comfortable with discomfort by developing skills for engagement, honest dialogue, and welcoming differences. Their research shows that most people feel their communities are far less divided than the country as a whole. Only around one in ten people across most faith groups say that their churches, synagogues, mosques, wards, and other places of worship are politically divided, perhaps reflecting the power of proximity in breaking down perceived divisions (Xu et al. 2024). When national debates over policy and social issues seep into local communities, congregations can be locations where people share their experiences and deeply held values. By creating the capacity and skills to engage across differences, congregations can foster baseline care for one another and acknowledgment of shared humanity.

Case studies developed by the More in Common Project showed that various religious communities, from Black Protestant to white Evangelical, to Muslim and Church of Jesus Christ LDS, experience internal conflicts that can be addressed through practices of story-sharing and listening (Xu et al. 2024). Many Americans look to their faith for guidance on social issues and to help define right and wrong. At the same time, Americans have different views on whether specific stances on social issues indicate being a good community member. For example, More in Common's research found that 65% of Evangelicals and 51% of Catholics believe that "being a good Christian/Catholic" means opposing abortion. Forty-six percent of Jews agree that "being a good Jew" means supporting the government of Israel, whereas 28% disagree (Xu et al. 2024). Disagreements are inevitable but become harmful when stances on these issues are used to exclude members of their community. When congregations create space for discord and dialogue without dehumanization, opportunities are fostered to practice faith tenants, further ideals as a democratic society, and prevent violence.

For example, the Rebuilding Democracy Project was formed during the 2016 election year when the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation (NVHC) found its congregational culture had been infected by the toxic politics of the election cycle (Aspen Institute Inclusive America Project 2021). Community leaders stopped trusting each other, and they avoided situations where disagreements would have to be hashed out in public. The politically purple congregation was facing an institutional crisis of governance (Aspen Institute Inclusive America Project 2021). Rather than isolating into political silos or sweeping the discontent under the run, the congregation leaned into their traditions and teachings to find creative and connecting paths forward. The congregation developed a process that included regular convening, consistent reflection, and pauses for prayer and study. Through this effort, they named "10 Faith Habits for Effective Citizenship", which include Sacred Space and Time, Sacred Leadership, Convening, Text, Repentance, Prayer, Music, Acts of Loving-Kindness, Affiliation, Intergenerational Interaction, and Governance (Aspen Institute Inclusive America Project 2021). The congregation survived the institutional crisis by weaving elements of these habits into their deliberations. It gained insight into how to use their religious habits and traditions to shape their congregational response to the most divisive problems. They now use the insights gained to teach other communities how to lean into their teachings to address internal political divides through the Rebuilding Democracy Project.

5. Utilizing Resources to Counter Political Polarization

While the primary outlet for community engagement continues to be charitable donations or service, more expect their congregation to engage in systemic change or political advocacy (Public Religion Research Institute 2023). Addressing polarization and extremism is essential to engaging in systems change. Congregational leaders can provide tools to counter polarization and model how to engage politically in ways rooted in core congregational values and traditions without fueling toxic polarization. When advocates see "bridge building" as succumbing to complacency in the face of injustice, binary political fervor can become disconnected from everyday people's complex and contradictory experiences. By learning, reflecting, and developing skills to communicate core values, congregants can move beyond essentializing claims that eliminate opportunities for listening and de-escalation and discover how to build relationships across differences without sacrificing values (Cavendish 2023). Sociologist James Cavendish documents how religion can be a resource to counter political polarization, drawing on research that shows how religious teachings and texts, religious organizations and small groups, and community networks can be agents of ideological depolarization across numerous issue areas (Cavendish 2023). Cavendish provides examples from Catholic and Protestant scriptures and traditions, which can be called upon to develop practices of caring for one's neighbors, listening to those in need, and actively engaging in one's community of care. These practices decrease polarization and increase a sense of community belonging.

Interfaith America, One America, and Essential Partners are three of many organizations that provide tools to congregations to counter polarization. They offer digital resources, training, mentorship, and program templates to support dialogue about potentially explosive issues (Stand Together 2025). Primary strategies include developing listening skills and curiosity, first practicing within a community, and then expanding to partner communities. Participants learn how to reflect on and share their stories and core values, identifying the sources of their deeply held beliefs. Personal reflection and storytelling expand to relationships rooted in mutual understanding, trust, and curiosity (www.interfaithamerica.org, accessed on 22 March 2025). Scholars with Essential Partners have extensively researched the impact of Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD), a method

of dialogue distinguished from more traditional forms of dialogue by its focus on process rather than outcome (Barthold 2020). While traditional dialogue might be designed to help people with opposing views find common ground or compromise, transformative dialogue is focused on improving communications and other interactions between the two sides, encouraging the increased awareness and understanding of multiple perspectives and differently constructed realities. Through synthesizing the current research on RSD and analyzing outcomes and findings using qualitative thematic analysis, Essential Partners found that practicing RSD resulted in notable shifts in embracing multiple perspectives, understanding positions of power, developing more positive connections, better communication, and expanding personal growth or self-reflection (Barthold 2020). Utilizing available tools to build relationships shows congregations can counter polarization and strengthen belonging and social cohesion within and beyond its walls.

6. Moving Beyond the Siloed Congregation

As congregations become less politically "purple" and more divided into "red" and "blue", intentional efforts to reach beyond congregation walls become more vital. Twenty years ago, people might have encountered someone with radially different political ideas in a Sunday School class; today, Americans have self-selected into identity-affirming bubbles (Perry 2022, p. 91). While there are benefits based on shared identity and belonging, taken to extremes, uniformity and homogeneity can lead to deep divides, isolation, and violence. This is specifically true for people who are marginalized and often outside of relationships with dominant populations. As our country grapples with extreme polarization, hate crimes against marginalized communities continue to rise (Piazza 2023). To challenge stereotypes and assumptions that can lead to polarization and even violence, congregational leaders can take intentional action to lead communities in building relationships outside their silos.

For example, the group Essential Partners began as an effort to break through highly divisive debates about abortion in the greater Boston area. Out of a series of dialogues, the founders developed and field-tested a model for reducing polarization, building trust and mutual understanding across deep divides, and making new relationships possible without sacrificing deeply held values. The talks brought together advocates (including faith leaders) from both "pro-choice" and "pro-life" commitments without the expectation that the two groups would come to the same opinion, but rather to foster understanding and to see the humanity of those with whom they disagreed (https://whatisessential.org/history, accessed on 22 March 2025). Over the years, practitioners helped people have richer conversations about abortion and issues like partisan polarization, race, gender, sexuality, the environment, and interfaith conflict. Essential Partners says their approach "engenders trust without compromising values, builds connections that make communities resilient, and fosters a deep sense of belonging for all" (https://whatisessential.org/history, accessed on 22 March 2025). Congregations can foster skills to counter polarization while advocating on issues they are most passionate about in ways aligned with their tradition's teachings. The More in Common Project found through their case studies that faith leaders are among the most trusted figures in local communities and are, therefore, uniquely positioned to bridge divides and mitigate toxic polarization. Faith leaders can draw from the scripture, values, and practices central to their traditions as they lead their congregations through political division. By emphasizing core values like self-reflection, kindness, humility, and respect for others, faith leaders can foster unity and help build stronger, more connected communities.

The Mustard Seed Project is another example. Formed in 1988, The Mustard Seed Project was founded to promote and strengthen American pluralism by increasing understanding and improving policies that impact American Muslims while also addressing

issues related to civil rights, religious freedom, political engagement, and media representation (Muslim Public Affairs Council 2025). The group quickly realized that building relationships with Evangelical Christians would be key to challenging stereotypes and assumptions that too often led to exclusion and even violence toward Muslim people in the United States. With this commitment, they began a series of conversations, events, and partnerships that planted the seeds for healthy community relationships. The organization, One America, works with faith leaders to support them in building local relationships across differences carried to their congregation (https://oneamericamovement.org/mission/, accessed on 22 March 2025). With team members across the US, they build multi-faith and cross-partisan networks of local leaders willing to work together toward solutions for their community's shared challenges. They strategically work in small-to-medium-sized cities where current or historical events make the pressures of polarization incredibly potent. Using a neuroscience-based approach, the organization reduces toxic polarization by providing tools and programs for faith-based communities committed to working across divides to solve common societal issues (One America Movement 2025). Over five years of work, 84% of One America Movement participants have said they feel the organization helped them see past their "bubble." Participants report an improved perception of others by 16.5% after engaging in One America Movement programs. While numerous programs support congregational efforts to move beyond silos, countless other congregations take the initiative to meet their neighboring communities grounded in a sense of curiosity, compassion, and shared commitment to the common good.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the increase in political polarization and the rise of Christian nationalism presents a profound challenge for congregations across the United States and beyond. While polarization and Christian nationalism in the US are particular in form, they are not unique globally. Lessons from congregational responses to political polarization can provide insights to communities facing similar phenomena worldwide. As faith communities navigate these tumultuous waters, embracing a framework that strengthens internal education, nuanced theological reflection, and skill building to navigate conflict is essential. Moving outside the silo of a congregation and developing relationships with diverse surrounding communities, and engaging with one another in meaningful dialogue rooted in the core tenets of faith traditions can unravel the divisions that threaten communal cohesion. Building relationships across differences is not a path to a bland or complicit unity; instead, it invites individuals to deepen ethical commitments while remaining connected to a shared humanity. Congregations are uniquely positioned to counteract the divisiveness of contemporary political landscapes, drawing on their historical roles as spaces for community building and connection. By fostering a mindset that encourages continuous learning and relationship-building across differences, faith leaders can model inclusive practices that reflect the values of compassion and understanding inherent in their traditions. Recognizing the shared humanity in each individual, regardless of political affiliation, can foster a deeper appreciation for diverse perspectives within congregational life.

Programming and research by organizations such as Essential Partners and One America show that intentional dialogue and skill development within congregations not only promote democratic principles but also enrich the spiritual lives of congregants. Ultimately, the call to action for congregations is clear: rather than retreating into silos of shared political belief, they must lean into the complexities of diverse viewpoints, creating spaces for rich, restorative dialogue that acknowledges and respects the lived experiences of all. Through these efforts, congregations can reclaim their vital role in fostering personal reflection, relational commitment, and democratic engagement.

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Article

Adaptive Pastoral Leadership in a Multicultural Church

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Abstract: The Catholic Church in the United States is no longer a Euro-American church receiving immigrants. Rather, it is an immigrant church, the cross-cultural Body of Christ. Serving such a diverse church is difficult and complex, providing both prophetic and pragmatic challenges for pastoral leaders seeking to build the parish as a dynamic, relational, multicultural community, living out the Gospel of Christ. The challenges of creating vibrant parishes in the light of growing diversity was the subject of a qualitative research study that interviewed more than 500 Catholic pastors, staff, and parishioners, from 40 parishes across the US. This study discovered that, while parishioners from different cultures want the same things—good liturgy, leadership, community, and faith formation—they want it in culturally distinct ways. This has created challenges not previously encountered by parish leaders. Effective leaders in these communities exhibited the skills of adaptive leadership, learning to put aside biases and assumptions, in a synodal style of ministry in which they listen deeply, and respond to, the needs of their faith community while using intercultural competencies. Together, pastoral leaders are becoming bridges, bringing together the faithful across cultures, enriching the life of the community.

Keywords: multicultural; parish; diversity; leadership; adaptive; synodal; competencies; intercultural

1. Introduction

When asked if the parish council meetings offered translation for the Spanish-speaking members of the parish, the answer from one Anglo member was, "We tried that, but it didn't work". This was in a parish that was 90% Latino, with a parish council that was 90% Anglo. Pressed further, the Anglo participant in our research on multi-cultural parishes said, "The Hispanics in the parish want the Anglos to take care of the administrative work of the parish". No further reasons were offered.

This language problem was a common issue in the churches involved in our national study of 40 multicultural Catholic parishes. Not one respondent in our study mentioned anything about offering translation services in parish meetings. In other words, if the parishioners did not speak English they were disqualified from joining the committee, pastoral council, or finance council. The lack of bilingual members in parish leadership, coupled with the lack of translation services, was just one of the barriers to building an inclusive and welcoming community in these 40 parishes. And that was only the beginning of the challenges.

The Catholic Church in the United States is no longer a Euro-American church now welcoming immigrants. It is, rather, a diverse church of many cultures and ethnicities, a diversity which enriches parish life. For some, this is a welcome change. For others, it is a

source of deep struggle. This is the landscape we encountered in the study of vitality in multiculturally diverse Catholic parishes, conducted for the Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI) and the Conference for Pastoral Planners and Council Development (CPPCD).

After extensive preparation, the authors conducted qualitative interviews from 2022 through 2023 with pastors, staff, and parishioners from 40 parishes located throughout the country. We focused on parishes which had a specific diverse membership, identified as 30% of the registered families. In all, we interviewed people from nineteen Hispanic parishes, an oversampling; nine African American parishes; five Vietnamese parishes, and twelve multicultural parishes with no single identifiable group, other than Anglo, over 30%. Some of these parishes overlapped. We discovered that most parishes, today, have a degree of cultural diversity, and that they differ, not in the traditional activities of a parish, but in how these activities are delivered. Mostly we discovered a rich tapestry of vibrant life and community within the parishes we interviewed.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this research was the ability to witness both the richness of the diversity in US Catholic churches, and the consequent adaptive challenges. We came to realize, from these conversations, just how much the US church has changed, yet how little the church has adapted to that change. Pastoral leaders serving multicultural communities will tell you theirs is challenging but highly rewarding work. Yet, even with the greatest care and compassion, unexpected roadblocks make for a bumpy journey. They are finding challenges that they have not had to address in the past. Add to this the challenge in the US, of those struggling with multicultural diversity. Parish communities minister to immigrants, both first and second generation, in a politically charged atmosphere. Church leaders speak of demographic changes as "the future of the church", but the people in our study said that "the future is now".

2. Research Methodology

Our study, "Exploring Vibrancy in a Multicultural Church", began with the research question, "What can we learn about parish vitality with a focus on parishes of diverse cultures?" We hoped to study the characteristics of vibrant Catholic parishes through the lens of cultural diversity. Between October 2022 and September 2023, we interviewed pastors, staff, and parishioners from 40 parishes, nationwide. Participating parishes were identified by CLI and CPPCD. With about 350 parishes contacted, and 40 parishes agreeing to participate, the rate of response to participation in the study was about 11.4%.

The research design focused predominantly on Hispanic, African American, and Vietnamese parishes, with an oversampling of Hispanic communities. Using the rubric that a parish had to have registered families comprising at least 30% of an identified culture group to qualify, the study included 9 African American parishes, 19 Hispanic parishes, and 5 Vietnamese parishes. Twelve additional multicultural parishes without an identifiable group over 30% were included. Occasionally there were two identifiable cultures in a given parish, bringing the total of parishes to 40.

The sample varied in ethnicity, size, and regional representation. Parishes came from all regions of the US: Northwest (2), Southwest (13), Midwest (12), Northeast (10), and Southeast (3). They included suburban, inner-city, and rural parishes, which ranged in size from 250 to 5300 families.

Using qualitative research methods (Yin 2009), we interviewed clergy, as well as over 400 staff and parishioners, from the 40 parishes. The design included one-on-one interviews with each pastor and two focus groups per parish, one with parish staff and another with parishioners.

Members of the focus groups were chosen by the pastor of that parish. Spanish language facilitation was offered to all parishes. Six focus groups were conducted in

Spanish and interpreted by a person familiar with parish pastoral work. The interviews were recorded and notes taken from each of these interviews and focus groups. These were hand-coded and analyzed using standard coding procedures for qualitative research.

3. Results

Two main aspects of parish vitality surfaced in our study. The first honors the unique landscapes of culturally diverse parishes and the shared adaptive challenges they face. While our findings cannot be generalized to whole populations or individual persons, they give an indication of what cultural diversity in parishes looks like today.

Secondly, three significant leadership lessons surfaced. While they would be effective for leaders of all communities, they are especially needed for those providing pastoral care in multiculturally diverse parishes. Success in leading these parishes requires adaptive leadership. A term from the business community and developed by Harvard professors Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, adaptive leadership is the ability to adapt to the ways in which the world is changing, go beyond simple technical solutions, work with members of the community, and together find new ways of moving forward (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). Consistent with adaptive leadership, these leaders practiced synodal listening and dialogue and were open to working with the community to find solutions. Synodality is the call from Pope Francis, after three years of worldwide consultations for the Synod on Synodality, to be a church that listens (Francis 2024). And finally, they developed intercultural competencies which recognize, understand, and handle cultural differences. 'Intercultural competence' is the term used by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to describe actions and attitudes necessary to create vibrant multicultural communities (USCCB 2011).

4. Discussion

4.1. Landscape of Culturally Diverse Parishes

Church life today is a changing and challenging story. First, we can affirm that churchgoers of all cultures and ethnicities want a good Sunday experience, caring pastors, engaging faith formation, a variety of opportunities to serve others, and a parish community that cares about them. However, we also discovered that how people wanted these ministries provided varied from one culture to another. To set the context, some of the uniqueness of the cultures we interviewed is described here. Please note, these descriptions are not intended to be generalized to specific individuals or cultural groups. Rather, they are indicators of the cultural vitality that we found in our study.

4.1.1. African American Parishes

We interviewed nine traditionally African American parishes. While African Americans comprise two percent of US Catholics (Pew Research Center 2024), their parishes are home, not only to people of African heritage, but also others as well such as recently immigrated Africans or those from the Caribbean. These historically Black churches tend to see themselves as a sanctuary in a racially charged world, many located in areas that have known the brunt of gun violence, illness, and poverty. Loyalty to the parish community is strong, many coming from generations of attendees. Members who no longer live in the area will drive long distances to go to Mass and be involved in these historically significant parishes. Three areas stood out in their interviews.

- **Sanctuary**: Each of the African American parishes we interviewed was intentionally welcoming. Attention is placed on treating all comers with respect and dignity. Interviewees spoke of making the church as esthetically pleasing as possible, with attention paid to groundskeeping and decorating with colorful African Kinte cloth. They take pride in statues of Black saints such as Martin de Porres, Peter Claver, or Our Lady of

Kibeho known for her apparitions in South Rwanda. Attention is paid to forming the whole person. For example, youth can find mentors, tutors, and sports in addition to religious formation.

- **Liturgy-centric:** Liturgies are described as joyful experiences, with "lots of participation, exuberance, clapping, shouts of praise, response to preaching, extended signs of peace",[1] even liturgical dancing. Key to this liturgical experience is the music. Choirs sing Gospel or full-Gospel music, often accompanied by Djimbe drums.
- **Source of Outreach and Social Justice:** While all the parishes in our study mention performing outreach, the groups that most consistently spoke of both outreach and social justice were the African American communities. The outreach went beyond parishioners and would involve, for example, supporting street people, neighborhood children, addicts, or those living in a food desert.

4.1.2. Vietnamese Parishes

Four percent of US Catholics are of Asian heritage, one of which is Vietnamese (Pew Research Center 2024). Five Vietnamese parishes participated in this study. Interviewees reminded us of the arrival of Vietnamese in the US, following the Vietnam war, which set a very unique context for these communities. Experiencing very different traditions and ways of relating was difficult for the earliest arrivals who then found comfort, safety, and solace in worshipping together. This experience also, according to one Vietnamese pastor, made them very aware of the need to welcome newcomers to this country. Three areas of parish life surfaced in our interviews.

- **Shaped by the Ancestors and Elders:** The ancestors and the elders are deeply revered by Vietnamese Catholics. The pastor is considered the most powerful and respected person in the parish, followed by male elders who must be consulted before any decision is made. This narrative is being challenged as younger generations are immersed in US culture. Elders who have been in the US the longest are "learning to respect and adapt into American culture and not impose their ideas but allow freedom to the younger generations". Losing these traditions is a source of grief for older generations. Keeping them is a source of tension for younger Vietnamese.
- **Rooted in Contemplative Spirituality:** Vietnamese Catholic spirituality is devotional, contemplative, and has deep roots in the religions of their ancestral country including Buddhism and Hinduism. Traditional Vietnamese spiritual practices, such as the litany of the ancestors, have been integrated into liturgical services. Especially important is Marian devotion, focused on our Lady of LaVang. Caring for the community is considered part of their spiritual life, with all expected to serve and share their gifts.
- **Forming the Children:** Ensuring their faith and their traditions are passed down to the next generations matters a great deal in the parishes we interviewed. Parishioners want their children to learn the Catechism and to be placed in their own classes, whether these are taught in English or Vietnamese. Interviewees spoke of the importance and joy of teaching children the old ways, traditional celebrations, and dances marking feasts and holy days.

4.1.3. Hispanic Parishes

Nineteen Hispanic parishes were included in this study. The phrase "many cultures, one Church" is critically important to understand in looking at these parishes. Hispanic Catholics, 35% of the US Catholic population (Pew Research Center 2024), have a common language but, as pastors often reminded us, come from a variety of Latin and South American countries as well as Spain. They represent a wide variety of traditions each with their own cultural understanding of Church and faith. The nineteen parishes in our

interviews represent people from twenty-three different countries. They also represent multiple generations, some of which do not speak Spanish.

- **Familial Spirituality:** Hispanic interviewees express a deep faith in Jesus along with a spirituality rooted in the extended family. Described as a highly devotional piety, this focuses on sacraments, prayer, and love for the Blessed Mother. For those of Mexican heritage, this devotion is focused on Our Lady of Guadalupe. Other countries may prefer other titles for the Blessed Mother. Visible reminders of this devotion, such as flowers left at the Mary Altar or pictures in the home, are important.
- **Sacramental Formation and Ritual:** Hispanic parents place great importance on the reception of Baptism, First Eucharist, and Confirmation for their children. *Quinceanera*, the coming-of-age celebration for girls reaching the age of 15, is especially important. While parents want their children to receive sacramental formation, reception of the sacrament is the highest priority.
- **Shared Parishes:** Interviewees spoke of a desire for a strong relationship with the pastor, preferably one who is a Spanish-speaker. Many Hispanic parishes are "shared parishes", where the Hispanic and Anglo communities belong to the same parish and share the same pastor, staff, and buildings, but exist as separate. siloed communities, each according to their own linguistic and cultural context (USCCB 2023). Attempts to combine these communities within the parish, especially on councils and committees, are often frustrated by language barriers.

4.2. Adaptive Challenges in Multiculturally Diverse Parishes

While this study did not directly ask participants to identify adaptive challenges, per se, we heard about many ways in which the church and the world are changing. Interviewees spoke about ways that the church needs to change internally to adapt to the external changes that surround them. These discussions allowed us to induce the following list of eight significant adaptive challenges facing today's parishes.

1. **Shortage of Culturally Competent Leadership**: It is no secret that parishes across the country are suffering from a shortage of priests, permanent deacons, religious sisters, and lay ecclesial ministers. That need is even more pronounced in these multicultural communities. There is a deep longing for clergy and staff who can speak their language; however, the need for bilingual and culturally competent leaders, especially Spanish-speaking clergy and staff, is not being met. Consequently, the church is turning to well-intentioned, and often otherwise educated, but unprepared English-speaking candidates, to fill these positions. We interviewed parishes that were largely Hispanic but neither the pastor nor anyone on the staff could speak Spanish. As one interviewee put it, "We are a mostly Hispanic parish with an all-Anglo staff".
2. **Lack of Parishioner Engagement**: In our experience, engagement of lay people is an adaptive challenge in most Catholic parishes. In multicultural parishes, once again, that challenge is even more formidable. Diversity has made it more difficult for parishioners to engage because of language or cultural differences. Many participants in our study see the need for more engagement of volunteer and leadership parishioners to emerge, especially from the diverse members of the communities in the parish. The sad irony here is that we also heard from diverse participants in our study who said that their gifts, talents, and ideas are not being fully understood or appreciated. This is often due to the lack of ability to speak the language and practice the competence that is needed from the pastors and parish staff.
3. **Changes in Technology**: Live-streaming has changed the landscape of every parish in two ways: It has increased access for the homebound while also disincentivizing some others from returning to church services or activities. Parishes are looking at

possible online formation, especially for teens and young adults. Technology changes also require expertise in social media, which our parishes found sorely lacking in this study. These challenges are even more pronounced in the multicultural parishes in our study. Language and cultural barriers aggravated parish attempts to build culturally accessible websites, to provide online formation, or to use other new technologies that are becoming essential tools of parish life today.

4. **Generational Shifts**: Younger generations are less inclined to make religion a priority in church life across the board in the US today. They are less involved in anything outside of home, friends, sports, and work. For years, older generations have been offering most of the volunteer activities in the parish, often without mentoring the next generation. Unexpected changes such as the pandemic have diminished the number of older parishioners actively engaged in parish life. In the multicultural parishes we interviewed, this problem was even more significant. They experienced the added challenge of cultures that expect young people to embrace the beloved traditions of their cultural group, which often included religious customs, while living in a very different culture. Young adults, many of whom are more likely to be bilingual, are leaving the Church, and few are looking for employment there, further aggravating the shortage of culturally competent candidates for staff positions or leadership.
5. **Inculturation**: Many Anglo members of these multicultural parishes wonder when the cultural groups in the parish will melt into the general population and not require Mass in their own language. This was the path taken by previous waves of immigration. On the other hand, foreign-born parishioners struggle with the loss of cultural practices and norms in general. They find church services in their native language and customs to be comforting reminders of the traditions they miss. They want to continue to hold church services in their native language for as long as possible. Parishes struggle to find the balance between preserving these popular traditions while integrating the cultural groups into the parish. Sometimes even the simplest tasks of orientation of newcomers are overlooked.
6. **Pace of Change with Growing Diversity**: As the world becomes more diverse, the face of the Catholic parish will continue to change even more drastically, as younger generations are ever more diverse. As they become predominantly English speakers, they may or may not retain their parents' native tongue. The accelerating pace of this change has not yet been recognized by church leaders. It will require a mindset change on the part of the Anglo members of the church, coming to grips with the reality that the church has changed, is changing, and will continue to change, and become even more diverse moving forward. Some people embrace change, but many do not. It can cause challenges, conflict, even polarization.
7. **Siloes/Divisions**: Many organizations struggle with departments, divisions and satellite offices that operate in siloes. The multicultural nature of these parishes lends itself to this type of segmentation. The parishes in our study spoke of the separate nature of the various communities of the parish, and how they operate in siloes. Each of the different groups (based on culture and language) create their own communities inside a parish and often operate as separate units. This happens most often in the "shared parishes" where members of the cultural groups in the parish often feel unwelcome in the English Masses and feel left out of the communication, planning and decision-making systems of the parish. Those who cannot speak English may not be considered for parish pastoral and finance councils, and parish committees. These parishioners are unable to communicate to the pastor and staff what they need, or how they could get involved in the life of the parish.

8. **Leadership Training and Formation**: Because of the language and cultural barriers, diverse parishes are having a particularly difficult time training their parish staff and lay leaders. They explained that most lay ministry formation programs are not offered in multiple languages. Many of the parish staff in our study explained that they were "hired from within". Typically, they spoke of being a regular parishioner who was volunteering their time or taking the initiative on a ministry in the parish and then hired to do a whole range of ministries without preparation and training.

4.3. Leadership of Culturally Diverse Parishes

Learning about leadership in a multicultural community, whether from designated positions of authority or informal leadership, was a significant focus of our interviews. When asked to name the most important mark of vitality in a parish, more than anything else, all cultural backgrounds named having good pastoral leadership. While leadership can come from anywhere in the parish, most often interviewees started with, "It all starts with the pastor". There was never doubt in our interviewees' minds that the pastor is the designated authority figure and one that is expected to show leadership. As the designated authority, then, a pastor sets the style and manner of leadership.

Parish staff, whether quite large, or only a couple of people, handle much of the day-to-day functioning of the parish. The staff members, most paid, some volunteers, were most often recruited by the pastor from within the parish community. They are often given leadership responsibility for specific segments of parish life but also work with the pastor in his responsibilities. Staff speak caringly about their communities and are cared for by them, in return. Both pastors and staff named the expected challenges of ministering in today's parishes, of providing pastoral care, a sacramental life, and faith formation.

Parishioners, of course, are deeply involved in the life of the parish and may surface as informal leaders in the community. Being a member of a welcoming community was the second-most important factor for people when choosing a parish to belong to, with nearly 90% of the interviewees naming it as a top priority. They want a place where people are "kind and happy", "engaged and caring", and "involved with lots of activities". They long for community, a place where they feel safe and at home.

We discovered quickly that the pastoral leaders of multicultural communities all speak of the additional challenges endemic to ministering in multicultural communities. In analyzing the style and characteristics of the leadership we encountered, three significant skill sets surfaced: adaptive leadership, synodal listening, and intercultural competencies.

4.3.1. Adaptive Leadership

Many studies—particularly by the Pew Research Center—document that the face of the Catholic Church has changed, and continues to change, from a largely white, European church to one characterized by increasing diversity (Pew Research Center 2024). Participants in our study lamented the fact that the Catholic Church has been slow to see this change as something that has already occurred. They noted that church leaders tend to talk about diversity, especially the growth in Hispanics, as something that will happen in the future, not as a current reality. However, pastoral leaders who are adapting to this new reality are those who are able to recognize these adaptive challenges and work towards adaptive change, using the skills of adaptive leadership.

The challenges faced by today's multicultural communities are problems and situations they have not previously needed to deal with, and for which there are no easy answers, no quick fixes, no technical adjustments that will suffice (Heifetz 1998). They call us to admit we don't have all the answers. Instead, the emphasis is on developing skills needed to change hearts and minds, behaviors and attitudes, cultural practices and

beliefs (Ebener and Jalsenjak 2021). Adaptive leaders recognize they must engage members throughout the parish and local community to find new ways of being together, in the face of these challenges. This requires courage, grace, wisdom and resilience to face the reality of today's world, to make coherent sense out of it as a team and to call people into an interactive change process. This means leaving a past behind that we loved and taking a leap of faith in God and each other to move toward an unknown future. It calls us, as recognized by the Vatican's Synod on Synodality, to a "conversion of emotions, images, and thoughts inhabiting our hearts which proceeds together with the conversion of pastoral and missionary activity (Francis 2024).

In this study, we witnessed adaptive leadership emerging from every direction: from the pulpit and the pews, from the clergy and the laity. We saw clergy step up and lead adaptive change, while also stepping back at times to create the space for leadership to emerge from others. Lay people step up and lead, even as, at times, the "old guard" needs to step back to create space for others to take the initiative. This kind of leadership comes when we practice the voluntary, interactive process that intends adaptive change (Ebener and Jalsenjak 2021).

Beyond the work of pastors and staff, participants spoke of the need to develop the leadership potential of people from the diverse communities in their parish, and the challenge of engaging parishioners in activities and leadership in their communities. One Anglo parishioner said, "There is potential for growth if we start getting culturally diverse members involved. Otherwise, this parish is dying". As one staff member put it, "We need more new people to step up and lead. It is easy to get people to volunteer for simple tasks, when asked, but few will take up a leadership role". According to participants in our study, one way this can be accomplished is to actively invite people to participate and to lead. "You have to get to know people, what their strengths and gifts are, then ask them to get involved and cultivate people into leadership".

To encourage more leadership, those in authority can provide (1) protection for those who take the initiative, (2) direction about how change can take place, and (3) support for those trying to lead adaptive change (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). In a parish, this applies not only to the pastor, but also to other members of the community, for example, the chair of the finance council, the women in charge of the kitchen, or the church secretary. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) call this "giving the work back" to the people (p. 123).

Adaptive challenges, such as the eight we list above, require a change in the culture of an organization, changing people's attitudes, behaviors and practices. Many organizations fail to deal with adaptive challenges precisely because they tend to gravitate toward quick fixes, which are easier to apply but which—at best—provide a partial solution to most of our problems. Changes like these cannot be coerced and require very specific leadership skills. In fact, in the face of a new global reality, the "command and control" approach to such problems no longer works, whether in the church, government, or business, much as people might want this to be the case.

New and complex challenges, such as the cultural change in church communities, call for a new kind of leadership. The words and actions of pastoral leaders help create the structures and culture that determine to what extent leadership can take place. Structures that are less hierarchical can encourage leadership. Cultures that are open to new ideas also encourage leadership. Those with the positional authority in an organization can decide whether to build the adaptive capacity of their people, or whether to hold tightly to the reins of power. People cannot be ordered to become more welcoming, and accepting of, this new diversity in the churches. Adaptive change, in the face of the cultural shifts facing our church communities, requires leadership that is coactive, and co-responsible, involving people at all levels of the organization (Heifetz and Linsky 2002).

To do this, adaptive leaders must listen and listen deeply. Heifetz and Linsky call this "listening to the song beneath the words" (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). Churches need leaders who can listen deeply and collaborate with people at every level of the community and beyond. We experienced this in the interviews. In pastoral language, these adaptive leaders demonstrated the skills of Synodal listening and intercultural competence, which are the next two findings we present here.

4.3.2. Synodal Listening

When asked what advice they would give to those beginning leadership in a multicultural parish, pastors unfailingly said, "LISTEN! Listen and never assume". Leaders have learned through experience what the Synod on Synodality came to as its most significant conclusion. "Listening is an essential component of every aspect of the Church's life" (Francis 2024).

By introducing the concept of synodal listening, Pope Francis invited the Catholic Church into exactly the type of interactive process that is required of adaptive leaders. This process reads a lot like a case study in adaptive leadership, which always starts with intense listening. It says we need to be "listening to people inside the Church and on the margins, discerning the signs of the times, and involving everyone in a participative process" (Francis 2021). Synodal participants came to believe that synodal listening will "inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, bind up wounds, weave new and deeper relationships, learn from one another, to build bridges, enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission" (Francis 2021).

The adaptive skills required of pastoral leaders enable them to ask open questions, listen with attention, and involve the people closest to the problem: those who can help identify the problems and surface possible solutions (Schein 2013). These are also the basis of synodal leadership: ensuring parishioners are able to recognize themselves in the life of the community (Francis 2024). While this may be a new concept in the life of the Catholic Church, it is clear that our respondents would agree. Parishioners want a pastor who listens. When pressed for evidence of the pastor's ability to listen, one person said he was good at "summarizing what the other person was saying and following that up with a question". Another said they knew the pastor was listening because his vision reflected the ideas and will of the people.

Which leads is to the third learning of our study, acquiring "a greater capacity to nurture relationships: with the Lord, between men and women, in the family, in the local community, among social groups and religions, with all of creation" (Francis 2024). Based on what we heard, we would add good relationships between and among pastors, staff, and parishioners.

What makes this difficult in multicultural parishes are the language and cultural barriers encountered by the pastors and staff. The question pastoral leaders ask is, "How can you listen carefully to your people when you do not speak the primary language of the person in front of you?" A particular challenge in any parishes is providing language accessibility on committees and councils. The challenge of finding and using interpreters can be daunting, especially in the face of the need for expediency in getting work done.

It was not only in administration that this is an issue. These barriers also challenge the pastoral and liturgical life of the community. One pastor spoke of having Masses in three language every weekend: Spanish, Vietnamese, and English. He was bilingual but not trilingual! Vietnamese and Hispanic parishioners especially long for same language leaders. This becomes especially important in providing pastoral care when people want

to share their pain and joy in their primary language. One response to this is developing intercultural competencies, our third finding.

4.3.3. Intercultural Competencies

As we have said, many of the pastoral leaders in our study struggled with language barriers, but even more with learning to be culturally sensitive. They understand that their parishioners long for pastoral leaders who understand their culture and long-held traditions. Their love for parishioners came through as they talked about the gift of getting to really know the parish and feeling very close to the parishioners. Pastors and parish staff worked at developing intercultural competencies for themselves and their parishioners. Larger parishes would have staff dedicated specifically to one group or another.

The US bishops' conference has named a set of skills required for intercultural competence. They include understanding there can be more than one perspective or interpretation of reality, more than one language, and the dynamics of intercultural communication. These require the skills of empathy, tolerance, and adaptivity as well as openness, curiosity, and tolerance of ambiguity (USCCB 2011).

Where inter-culturation is happening, pastors and parish staff are intentionally working towards inclusion and being culturally sensitive. According to our interviewees, cultural sensitivity, a phrase we often heard, is needed. Pastoral leaders learned the need to be present to, and caring for, the diversity of the community. They often spoke of the importance of not making assumptions, and for ensuring rituals and festivities important to a given cultural population.

More than one staff member spoke of studying Spanish in order to better communicate with Spanish-speaking parishioners. Some hosted intentional gatherings or parish-wide celebrations designed to encourage intercultural conversation. Others spoke of the need to build bridges, develop relationships, and call forth new leadership. Some make it a priority to speak/learn the language and understand the customs and culture of parishioners and the local community.

One African American parish told the story of an Anglo priest who was the pastor of a historically Black church for 30 years and was deeply loved by his congregation because "he was willing to immerse himself into the people and the culture of Black Catholics". They said that this was an example of how the pastor does not need to be the same ethnicity as his congregation but needs to be culturally sensitive and competent.

Participants in our study also spoke about the need to be able to engage in healthy conflict resolution with parishioners, another adaptive leadership skill, especially during parish meetings. Once again, this communication skill requires that the leaders can speak the language and understand cultural differences in dealing with conflict. It is an important aspect of cultural competence to handle task conflict (honest differences of opinion) without allowing it to become relational conflict.

5. Conclusions

The world is becoming increasingly complex, interdependent, secular, multicultural, and unpredictable (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). The same is true of parish life. It requires continuous reflection, dialogue, learning, and action (Glaser 2014). That is the stuff of leadership, a voluntary, interactive process that intends adaptive change (Ebener and Jalsenjak 2021). Organizations need to adapt to these global changes and adopt a new approach to leadership. Religious institutions are no different.

Adaptive challenges require a change of hearts and minds, which requires adaptive leadership. To respond to the eight adaptive challenges facing today's diverse parishes, strategies are needed to recruit younger and more diverse members, practice authentic

hospitality, engage the laity, share leadership, exude joy in the parish community, build bridges across cultural divisions, encourage hearts that burn for social justice, listen with intention and empathy, be mindful of the differences in our cultural communities, and most of all, nurture a welcoming attitude on the part of everyone in the parish so it becomes embedded in the culture.

Religious institutions need adaptive leadership from everywhere, from the pulpit and from the pews. We need clergy to step up and lead adaptive change, while also creating space for lay leadership to emerge. We need lay people to step up and lead, and at times the "old guard" needs to step back to create space for younger members to take the initiative.

Parish vitality looks different in the new global reality of cultural and ethnic diversity. It suggests a need to change our mindset. It calls us to be adaptive, synodal, and interculturally competent. The diverse cultures of today's parish life add strength and beauty to the Catholic Church. It is time to 're-imagine' what it means to be a parish. The opportunities this diversity present to the Church can be more fully realized if we increase cultural competence, cultural awareness, and language skills among our clergy, parish staff, and parishioner leadership.

Some people might view this seismic shift toward a diverse church as "the future of the church" but research participants in this study clearly demonstrated that "this is the present church, not the future". The church needs to fully embrace this new reality and adapt to this global change, not only because it affords the opportunity to grow the church, but also because it is what Christian discipleship entails. We are a diverse church, not a church with diversity. We are sisters and brothers in Christ whose faith and lives are intertwined.

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Abbreviations

CLI	Catholic Leadership Institute
CPPCD	Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development
USCCB	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
SoS	Synod on Synodality, Final Report

Notes

[1] NB: Direct quotes are taken from the interviews conducted for this research, unless otherwise indicated.

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Article

Under-Connected: Building Relational Power, Solidarity, and Developing Leaders in Broad-Based Community Organizing

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Abstract: Many pastors, faith leaders, and community organizers are isolated and under-connected to communities of praxis that can accompany them as they go about their social change work, helping them to ground their organizing in their faith lives. There is a crisis of leadership development and training. This paper argues for a rethinking of leadership development as grounded in conceptions of relational power, value-based organizing, and deep solidarity. Leaders, it is often said, are those who have followers. This definition takes for granted models of leadership that were first developed in the 1940s in Alinsky-style networks and adapted in the 1980s and 1990s in the neo-Alinskyite movement. This article extends this approach to home in on what leadership development amounts to in broad-based community organizing so as to help congregations and faith leaders see how community organizing can be an enactment and expression of their faith lives. Organizing strategies of leadership development can sit at the heart of congregational development. Developing leaders is about transformative critical reflection on premises of meaning schema. Leadership development is connected to leaders developing in the sense of exploring new ways of seeing the world and acting on them. By refocusing the organizing strategy of leadership development around relational power and deep solidarity, pastors, faith leaders, and community organizers can build stronger institutions.

Keywords: leadership; leadership development; community organizing; relational power; deep solidarity

1. Introduction

"This is the basic difference between a leader and the organizer", Saul Alinsky, that notorious organizer, agitator, and provocateur, once wrote in *Rules for Radicals*. "The leader goes on to build power to fulfill his desires, to hold and wield the power for purposes both social and personal. He wants power himself. The organizer finds his goal in creation of power for others to use." (Alinsky 1971, p. 80). In the Alinskyite and neo-Alinskyite tradition of community organizing—what I will call broad-based community organizing (BBCO)—organizers identify and develop leaders.[1] "One of the most important tasks of the organizer, in addition to identifying these natural leaders and working with them, is working for their actual development so that they become recognized by their following as leaders in more than one limited sphere." (Alinsky 1989, p. 74). Broad-based community organizing is perhaps the most widely used form of political practice by religious institutions today.[2] Local affiliates, what Alinsky called "people's organizations", are typically part of national networks that train organizers, share resources, and collaborate on certain political actions. In all this work, building peoples' organizations begins by identifying and developing leaders.

It is not surprising, then, that the critiques of BBCO have aimed right for this central concept of leadership. Over the years, the neo-Alinskyite tradition has been critiqued as an androcentric, heterosexist, Christian, and white-dominated style of reformist organizing.[3] Several of the four largest national networks of BBCO (Faith in Action (previously PICO), The Gamaliel Foundation, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), and The Direct Action Resource and Training Network (DART)) have engaged in concentrated revisioning of their organizing styles around race, power, and gender.[4] These revisions of strategy and style have come with changes to definitions of leadership to a more relational approach (see Stauffer 2024a; Speer and Han 2018, pp. 745–58). The field is moving toward an understanding that leaders are not only those who have followers but also those who hold and wield relational power.

At the heart of this conceptual debate on leadership in BBCO is not only a question of what defines a leader but also how leaders *develop.* This is a crucial difference, because organizing is a specific social practice: as there is a difference between mobilizing and organizing, so there is a difference between leadership identification and leadership development.[5] Developing leaders is a core aspect of the social practice of organizing, and it calls for clarity on how leaders develop and what development amounts to. Yet, there is little in the BBCO literature that addresses these questions. The first section of this essay explores three promising but ultimately unsatisfying approaches: one explores how organizing develops the moral agency of religious activists; a second explores how leadership is about "earned entitlement to deference" from one's peers; and a final approach considers how organizations develop strategic capacity for power by developing leaders who are independent, committed, and flexible. All of these accounts have different aims than exploring the *how* of leadership development, especially in terms of congregational leaders.

Leadership development calls for pedagogical clarity, because leadership development does not just happen. It takes the introduction of peer relationships and acquisition of knowledge, particularly regarding relational power and deep solidarity, in learning environments that focus critical reflection on premises of meaning schema. Even with this careful intentionality, its outcome is indeterminate. The second section of the paper explores a particular case that attempts to facilitate such experiences through insights gained from transformative and critical pedagogies. The relevant case is a leadership training program I helped design with the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University: Solidarity Circles.[6] I explore the facilitation and program design of Solidarity Circles to extrapolate larger lessons for leadership development. These insights help to offer an initial outline of one understanding of leadership development and its proper role in BBCO and congregational settings.

The final section explores the relevance of this conception of leadership development for congregational vitality. Many participants in BBCO and Solidarity Circles are leaders in congregations. There is a deep connection between building strong BBCO affiliates and strong congregations: Good organizing builds strong churches. The same goes for Solidarity Circles—it is a program meant to positively contribute to the revitalization of Christian churches, and it does so through its strategy of leadership development by advancing relational power and deep solidarity. Organizing is about building relational power for working people's communities, grounded in judgements of sacred value by working people. There is a relational and value-based basis to BBCO, and attitudes of sacred value sit at the heart of the social practice. In congregations, developing leaders involves the transformative work of introducing new meaning schemas regarding relational power and deep solidarity. By refocusing the organizing strategy of leadership development around relational power and deep solidarity, pastors, faith leaders, and community organizers can build stronger institutions and decentralized structures of leadership.

1.1. Three Approaches: Moral Agency, Entitled and Earned Deference, or Prisms

Leaders and leadership figure widely in the broad field of literature addressing broad-based community organizing. As I have explored elsewhere, the literature can be usefully broken up into three camps.[7] There is a social theory and sociologically oriented camp (to which I would now add the socio-historical approaches, like Fisher and Betten and Austin[8]), a second, more theologically oriented camp, and finally a camp of religious, philosophical, and political theorists who explore BBCO as a site of grassroots democracy. Leadership is not a given important feature in all of these camps; some take it for granted, merely addressing it offhand as they turn to focus on larger conceptual questions of sovereignty and the state of democratic life.

C. Melissa Snarr's *All You That Labor* explores how religious activists in the worker justice movement encounter and engage a terrain for increasing their moral agency. Moral agency is "a person's commitment and capacity to discern and work for the needs, rights, responsibilities, and flourishing of oneself and others" (Snarr 2011, p. 6). As religious activists discern and work for personal and social goals, they expand their moral agency. Crucial here is attention to the possibilities and limits of the institutional ecology of the field of worker justice. The organizational landscape and social practice of organizing itself both encourage and frustrate the moral agency of religious activists, especially women leaders. Snarr's explorations of how religious practices can be instrumentalized for political purposes register an important point for conversations on leadership development in congregations; that is, moral agency surpasses a simple political frame and "reveals the multiple ways religious networks, theologies, and practices can build the commitment and capacity of people to discern and 'do something' for the needs, rights, responsibilities, and flourishing of low-wage workers".[9] The wider frame of moral agency makes possible different moral relationships within a constituency that are grounded in "theological solidarity", which helps to reframe the political goals of the group itself, in non-instrumental theological terms.

Snarr's work helps us see how religious activists in the worker justice movement reframe a living wage as not merely just ethically right, but good in moral and theological terms. Because this frame is theologically freighted, it asks for different sorts of social relationships consisting of "theological solidarity" that are grounded in "the inclusive love of God": this work "envisions participatory justice as part of God's desire for the world".[10] Centering the moral agency of religious activists changes how organizers practice and enact their work, expanding our political repertoire, introducing new rituals, and influencing organizing strategies.

Developing moral agency, however, is different from developing leaders. Leadership, as Jeffrey Stout has argued, is a normative term (Stout 2010).[11] To identify someone as a leader is to set them apart in a group and to qualify their relationships. For Stout, leadership refers to earned entitlement to deference from one's peers and carries with it accountable authority and democratic hierarchy.[12] Building on Alinsky's understanding of native leaders, Stout illustrates how native leaders are those who, through their lives, have earned the trust and deference of others on certain matters: on legal matters, say, or moral judgements. Native leaders tend to be "partial"—rarely do we encounter leaders to whom we defer on many different matters.[13] However, because people's organizations deal with "every problem in the life of the people", organizers seek to develop "well-rounded" leaders into those who earn the deference and authority from their peers in many different aspects of life.[14]

Stout notes that organizers develop leaders by selecting those who "already possess an earned entitlement to deference on some topics". Next, the organizer seeks to "widen the range of topics" to which these leaders earn entitled deference and authority within

a specific group and then expand and widen the groups.[15] Organizers do this by consistently placing leaders in situations that challenge them and demand that they earn the deference and authority of their peers in ever-new contexts. This last task is "essential" for Stout because in these new contexts relational power is exercised and built, grounded in relationships of accountable authority and earned deference from one's peers.[16]

This process of leadership development, as Stout has outlined it, doesn't get off the ground if a leader doesn't have a clarity of self-interest: a value-laden stake in the work of building democratic power for the people's organization. This is why, for Alinsky, leaders are interested in building power for themselves *and* the people's organization. They seek to wield power themselves. Mishandled, statements like this can sound like Alinsky is encouraging the development of tyrants who seek to dominate their peers. Tyrants abuse their position of authority by dominating and oppressing others (Stout 2017).[17] What tyrants misunderstand, however, is that power is relational, not incremental.[18] Power is a capacity to make meaningful change grounded in relationships.[19] Unilateral power (power-over) permits and encourages domination. Relational power (power-with), however, is only possible by earning the entitled deference to positions of accountable authority.

Now, self-interest is not to be confused with selfishness; self-interest has to do with the value and relational basis of the social practice of organizing itself and helps leaders get clear about why they are in the fight in the first place. In other work, I have argued for supplementing self-interest talk with talk of democratic individuality.[20] Democratic individuality is an achievement of selfhood in certain forms of associational life. It more clearly illustrates the social nature of the public self than "self-interest" by grounding narratives about who we are and what we are capable of in broader narratives of who we can be together and how we get there. On these connected and related points—that leadership is 1. a normative term grounded in 2. relational power—I take Stout and Alinsky to be right. I do want to push Alinsky and neo-Alinskyite understandings of leadership, however, to see the value of democratic individuality so as to highlight the relational and value basis of self-interest and the social practice of broad-based community organizing itself.

Developing leaders is an additional step beyond identifying them. As I noted above, Stout briefly addresses this. Alinsky highlights it as a crucial aspect of the work of organizing in both *Reveille* and *Rules*.[21] Recently, Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa have explored in detail how organizations develop leaders through different organizing strategies, which they call "prisms" (Han et al. 2021). Prisms, in this sense, are different strategies of organizing that develop particular capacities and characteristics of organizational leaders. "Prisms" for Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa, is a term meant to "focus on a particular kind of collective power building".[22] Different prisms yield different outcomes in terms of power built, similar to how light is refracted through a prism. Here, organizations develop leaders and build collective power by developing a prism of relational power, which adopts three organizing strategies: 1. developing an independent power base, a 2. committed, yet 3. flexible cadre of leaders.[23]

Independent power is grounded in a people, so base-building is key, as holding an independent source of power is crucial in challenging traditional positions of political authority, which tend to be conferred through office. Adopting a relational understanding of power, these scholars then argue that organizations strategically build power by "having an 'authentic relationship' with an 'organized' base of constituents".[24] Political life is fickle and tumultuous, so cultivating an independent base that leaders are accountable to secures power that elected officials often do not have.[25] Building this base grounds the vision and identity of the political fight in the constituency, not in the policy issue or campaign. This provides simultaneous commitment and flexibility that is essential for building the strategic

capacity of a people's organization.[26] Commitment to the constituency enables "civic feedbacks" of the organizing practice, which are crucial in the evaluation and development of the organizations. Civic feedback demonstrates how leaders and organizations grow through evaluation, self-critique, and learning from mistakes and successes.[27] For Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa, organizations that desire to build strategic capacity for power in political life would do well to adopt a prism or organizing strategy that encourages independence, commitment, and flexibility within their leadership.

Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa are the best example of political scientists who explore what leadership development amounts to, but their attention to theology and religion is largely instrumentalized in the service of political and economic ends. In my own experience and research, I have found that this "secularized" mindset only limits the political theological imagination of organizing.[28] People organize to protect and fight for what they hold dear, what they hold sacred. Judgments of sacred value sit at the heart of organizing because BBCO is about building relational power for working people's communities by working people. People organize because of relationships of deep concern and care. Attitudes of sacred value are at the heart of the organizing process and throw us into the fight in the first place. Sacred value is a term that encompasses both religious and non-religious value attitudes. While Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa's work is the most precise in strategies for how leadership develops, Stout and Snarr help to fill out this conversation for congregations and religious organizers. In Stout's case, as leaders go about earning the deference of their peers, they do so through decisions and actions that grant the "moral authority" to lead their peers, which involves protecting the sacred values that ground the organizing process.[29] In pinpointing the moral terrain of leadership, Stout lifts up Alinsky by saying, "In democratic politics, Alinsky wrote, '*the tradition is the terrain*'".[30] The social practice of broad-based organizing depends on judgments of sacred value that are nested within social practical reasoning that is constitutive of a tradition's moral terrain. The secularized mindset that constricts our political imagination of organizing impacts how leaders are developed in BBCO, in part because it can lead to deeming judgements of sacred value as "out of bounds" or too untamely when they can significantly contribute to building relational power of a BBCO constituency. This is the value of Snarr's "theological solidarity" that can ground the practice of relational organizing in a wider theological framework.

In the next section, I will deepen and expand on the Alinsky and neo-Alinskyite contributions to this conversation by exploring a more precise understanding of leadership development. Leadership development is very much concerned with judgements of sacred value and broader meaning schemas they contribute to, because BBCO is deeply concerned with relational power and deep solidarity. In the conclusion, I will return to these brief notes on judgements of sacred value and BBCO to highlight the upshot for Christian congregations when broad-based organizing is seen as an enactment of Christian faith. Leadership development that is grounded in critical reflection on relational power and deep solidarity is a crucial part of leadership in Christian congregations and their overall vitality, especially when vitality is understood in terms of "leader-full" communities.

1.2. Transforming Leaders

Leadership does not occur in a vacuum. The approaches that I have outlined above follow two trends that Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi identifies in her work, *Unraveling Religious Leadership:* firstly, scholars and practitioners draw on general approaches to leadership and adapt them to religious settings; secondly, they tend to "focus on traits, behaviors, skills, or leader-follower relations" (Lizardy-Hajbi 2024, p. 16). Lizardy-Hajbi calls for accounts of religious leadership that question this overarching frame as informed by modern (neo)colonialism. She asks us to question the deeper power relations that support

such accounts of leadership and instead offers an approach of "leaderships" that highlights the "pluriversal decoloniality" that comes with embracing a broad range of leaders in religious and pastoral settings.[31] Lizardy-Hajbi's work of unraveling the colonial threads tightly woven around the concept of leadership returns us to the relationships and practices sustaining conceptions of leadership in concrete communities.

Similarly, in my case, leadership is not a concept to be uncritically embraced, but instead furthered toward particular ends that wrestle with relations of political, economic, and epistemic power. In this section, I will explore a case that grounds leadership development in relational power and deep solidarity. To extend and supplement the approaches explored in the above section, in this section I attempt to draw out from a singular program broader repercussions for strategies of leadership development in broad-based community organizing.[32]

I should mention that while Lizardy-Hajbi takes up power as a primary analytic in her study, her approach follows an understanding of power that is Foucauldian in genealogy. While complementary, I do not primarily engage with Foucauldian or decolonial theory—but not because I do not believe there to be a worthwhile conversation between BBCO and decolonial theory. I simply have different aims in this paper. Let me suggest, however, that Lizardy-Hajbi's emphasis on "reweaving"—especially in drawing from Alicia Garza's work—and the prioritizing of decolonial praxis are wonderful places to start that conversation between leadership in BBCO and decolonial theory.[33]

Solidarity Circles is a leadership training program and virtual peer network that I have led at the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University since 2021. Solidarity Circle participants meet monthly for 90 min over a video-based platform and engage in a facilitated discussion expanding upon a competency-based asynchronous curriculum consisting of short videos and readings. Each session includes examination of a case study developed by the participants themselves to ground and contextualize the competencies in participants' current experience. While occasionally including non-U.S.-based participants, participants' context is largely that of the U.S. The program lasts for 9 months, and the curriculum is grounded in four competencies. Competencies here are understood as skills, knowledge, or dispositions. They are 1. Power analysis—the curriculum provides a relational understanding of power, highlighting material and class relationships in theological and biblical interpretation; 2. The value-based community organizing skills of the relational meeting and the listening campaign; 3. Active listening—particularly pastoral and prophetic skills in active listening; and finally, 4. Storytelling as a framework for social change—in part building off of Marshall Ganz's work on public narrative, but also including insights from narrative identity approaches to individual and group life (Ganz 2024).

There are two crucial shifts that Solidarity Circles makes in terms of how it develops leaders: the first is the centering of economic democracy to political democracy;[34] the second is connecting facilitation strategies to those developed by transformative and critical pedagogy.[35] These two shifts provide a constructive contribution to the leadership development of Solidarity Circles. Let me say a bit about centering economic democracy and the particular facilitation style of Solidarity Circles.

Regarding the first point about the centering of economic democracy to political democracy, as Stout and Alinsky note, leadership is a normative concept highlighting particular capacities and forms of relationships established and nurtured within and between groups. Building on this, however, insofar as leadership is "earned", it occurs in relationships of mutual recognition where interlocutors *count* in terms of self-fulfillment and in political and economic terms. Relations of mutual recognition support earned entitlement of deference. Recognition, as Nancy Fraser has explained, involves redistribution, in

part because capitalism is more than a mere economy but an "institutionalized social order" that expands beyond market relations.[36] Exploitation is a core concern here, but so are domination and expropriation (Dawson 2016, pp. 143–62). Relationships of earned entitlement exist in these material conditions; accountability in democratic life involves the material realities of such relationships that make up our social life. If participants do not "count" economically, epistemically, or politically, recognition is imperiled.[37] Economic democracy is part and parcel of political democracy. When democracy in the economy becomes enfeebled, democracy in politics is not secure. This is a lesson that the political and economic left in the U.S. learned long ago, namely that the fight for democracy needs to be both political and economic—it needs to be about unionization and about elections.[38]

Solidarity Circles began as a program to meet a need identified in clergy, faith leaders, and organizers broadly. This leads to the second point regarding facilitation strategies. In the face of rising burnout and the Great Resignation during the COVID-19 pandemic, pastoral leaders felt (and continue to feel) increasingly isolated (Stauffer 2024c). To put it colloquially, pastoral leaders in congregations are over-resourced when it comes to toolkits—there is a preponderance of Bible studies or adult education classes on numerous issues available online. What cannot be readily found, however, are communities of praxis that serve to accompany leaders as they go about their social change work and that help them ground this work in their faith values. Leaders are under-connected. They are hungry for relations of deep solidarity.[39] The creation of learning communities that foster relationships between adult learners to engage in critical reflection on the roots of social and economic problems they face is a pedagogical move indebted to transformative pedagogy.[40] "Through reflection," one of the founders of transformative pedagogy tells us, "we *see through* the habitual way that we have interpreted the experience of everyday life in order to reassess rationally the implicit claim of validity made by a previously unquestioned meaning scheme or perspective".[41] Solidarity Circles seeks to develop leaders by transforming previously held understandings about power and the material conditions that sustain the current neoliberal racial capitalist order.

The political and economic culture in the U.S. does not teach people to seek out relational power. It is more common for people to abide by the adage that absolute power corrupts absolutely, so people tend to think that power is to be avoided. The focus on relational power in Solidarity Circles is an intentional intervention in this popular conception. Similarly, broad-based community organizing offers a transformative social and political framework for leaders to see themselves as powerful political and economic agents. Lifting up this tradition of organizing and teaching the specific skills of BBCO, like the relational meeting and the listening campaign, Solidarity Circles facilitates an opportunity for participants to conceive of themselves in transformative ways. By teaching relational power, Solidarity Circles joins BBCO as an avenue in leadership development.

As coined and developed by Joerg Rieger, deep solidarity is not a moral claim—the central claim is not that leaders ought to form certain political, economic, or social relationships. It is an analytical claim that materially, politically, and even theologically, the lives of working people are more deeply connected and dependent on one another than we are led to believe.[42] In the capitalocene—an age where capitalism, as an institutionalized social order, has more deeply shaped the global environmental and human order than humans or non-human creatures have—we need relationships of deep solidarity.[43]

In both of these interventions, transformative pedagogy helps explicate and spell out leadership development. It offers a strategy of adult learning that enables learners to transform their previously held frameworks into new ones—in regard to the conversation at hand, previously held schemes about relational power and deep solidarity. Leaders develop by critically reflecting on previously held meaning frameworks. I mean something specific

by critical reflection—not mere introspection or general reflexivity. Critical reflection is deeply connected to Paulo Freire's notion of "conscientization": the very concept of transformation in transformative pedagogy is linked to Freire's "conscientization", and both share an "emancipatory potential" (Vaikousi 2020, pp. 41–56). In transformative pedagogy, "adult educators help learners identify the incongruities and contradictions that are inherent in their situation in order for them to realize what their real needs are and 'deal with constraints which had before been perceived as given and beyond their control.'"[44] What is transformed in transformative pedagogy are "meaning schemes" or "meaning perspectives".[45] Critical reflection plays a crucial role in this transformation. Through critical reflection, Solidarity Circle participants connect the social, material, and political conditions of a dilemma they face and consider how to act to transform it.[46]

Reflection can focus on a number of different aspects: from the *how* of an action—the process by which learners seek to solve problems or accomplish tasks—to the *what* of the object of learning—whether or not the task is right, good, or appropriately selected. It is the *why* of learning that critical reflection focuses on: the premises of the learning. Only through critical reflection on premises do learners enter a space where meaning schema can be transformed. This focus on the "why" is often reiterated in BBCO circles, as organizers will seek to engage leaders' "why" in their concern for an issue or community. Here, the facilitation strategy of critical reflection makes explicit and refines this organizing intuition. Critical reflection becomes "transformative when assumptions are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise unjustified".[47] Developing leaders involves facilitating learning experiences that make possible this transformation. Leadership development, then, is connected to leaders developing in the sense of exploring new ways of seeing the world and acting on them.

By implementing the strategy of critical reflection in Solidarity Circles, leaders are developed in peer networks. Participants gain certain competencies and acquire knowledge, yes; but they are developed principally through critical reflection on premises held regarding relational power and deep solidarity. This approach extends the conversation on leadership development started in the above section by offering a pedagogical approach and framework to situate the development of leaders in BBCO. From my own personal experience, connecting these pedagogical insights from transformative pedagogy to the tradition of BBCO is a friendly strategy. When I first started organizing for the Industrial Areas Foundation, the first two books I was given were *Rules for Radicals* and *Pedagogy of the Poor*. What Solidarity Circles does in this conversation is make explicit particular facilitation tools in order to home in on strategies of developing leaders by introducing new transformative meaning schema regarding relational power and deep solidarity.

What is more, if the *tradition is the terrain*, as Stout picks up from Alinsky, and the relationships can be grounded in religious and theological frameworks, as Snarr suggests, adopting explicit pedagogical approaches to leadership development like transformative pedagogy makes clearer how sacred values are at the center of the organizing practice. Judgements of value, like sacred value, sit at key choice-moments in our lives, and narratives are developed around these moments that uphold certain meaning schema. Critical reflection on these value-laden frameworks can help clarify the relational and value basis of organizing. Developing leaders in this sense, then, is about engaging leaders as whole persons who make judgments about the world and seek to protect and fight for what they hold most dear. Transformative pedagogy offers a way to engage these attitudes in the process of leadership development.

2. Conclusions

These shifts in leadership development have implications for conversations regarding religious leadership and congregational vitality. Good community organizing builds strong churches. Organizing affiliates are successful when their member constituencies are "leader-full" structures, meaning there exists a diversity of roles woven into a relational fabric that is accountable and democratic. BBCO is about working people coming together to build economic and political power for working people's communities. At the heart of the social practice are attitudes of sacred value—people are thrown into organizing fights because people, goods, or ideals they care deeply about are threatened, violated, or destroyed. Unfortunately, attitudes of sacred value are often assumed to be divisive and to threaten the solidarity of a constituency. In this article and in other work, I have proposed that centering attitudes of sacred value can help build stronger BBCO constituencies across deep differences.[48]

Organizing reweaves the relationships within an organization. It helps build necessary structure that fosters relational power.[49] Structure is necessary for building power, and as Alinsky and Stout have illustrated, leadership that is democratic and accountable is not dominating or oppressive but instead is a by-product of the relational power built when "native leaders" earn the entitlement of deference on certain matters from their peers. Congregations that intentionally foster this sort of leadership development, which utilizes critical reflection on relational power and deep solidarity, can build stronger teams and develop organizational cultures that are leader-full, rather than undemocratic hierarchies enshrined in offices of power.[50]

Solidarity Circles illustrates how congregations are hungry not only for certain competencies that equip their leadership with particular skills or knowledge in order to more adequately address the problems and dilemmas they face. More than this, congregations recognize the importance of developing leaders through concentrated attention on relational power and deep solidarity. This intentional facilitation of critical reflection on the premises of meaning-perspectives of participants addresses a gap in BBCO, namely, specificity in what developing leaders amounts to and how to successfully go about it. It is one approach among others that uniquely presents the value and relational basis of BBCO as crucial to organizing's success and the development of leaders by transforming their understanding of relational power in networks of deep solidarity.

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Notes

1 I am following Robert Fisher's terms of "Alinskyite" and "neo-Alinskyite" to encompass a wide field of community organizing strategies, which experiences a concentration during Saul Alinsky's life and the founding of the Industrial Areas Foundation, yet undergoes revisions in strategy after Alinsky. Broadly, "Alinskyite" refers to the decades of the 1940s–1950s (which builds on decades of social service, social work, neighborhood organizing that Fisher wonderfully explores), and the "neo-Alinskyite" begins in the 1960s with new iterations of organizing building local affiliates of national networks that establish local, institutionally broadly-based, peoples' organizations (Fisher 1984).

2 (Wood and Fulton 2015), chapter 1 for analysis on the field of BBCO.

3 See early critiques in (Sinclair 2008, p. 48; Stall and Stoecker 1998, pp. 729–56; Lloyd 2022).

4 See, for example, Gamaliel's Race and Power Summit: https://raceandpower.org/. "Race and Power 2024." Accessed March 26, 2025. https://raceandpower.org/; and the Ntosake conference: https://gamaliel.org/. "Ntosake-Gamaliel Network." Accessed March 26, 2025. https://gamaliel.org/our-work/ntosake/. For similar revisions in Faith and Action, see Wood and Fulton, *A Shared Future*.

5 For one account of the difference between mobilizing and organizing, see (McAlevey 2016).

6 For more on Solidarity Circles, see https://www.religionandjustice.org/solidarity-circles (accessed on 10 May 2025).

7 cf. Stauffer, *Listening to the Spirit*, 32.

8 Fisher, *Let the People Decide*; (Betten and Austin 1990).

9 Snarr, *All You that Labor*, 147.

10 Snarr, *All You That Labor*, 153.

11 Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*, 305n44.

12 Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*, 100.

13 Alinsky, *Reveille*, 74.

14 See note 13 above.

15 Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*, 101.

16 See note 15 above.

17 I am following Stout's definition of domination, oppression, and tyranny here. Domination is to be at the mercy of another's arbitrarily will; oppression is characterized by unjustly forcing someone into servitude. Cf Prof. Jeffrey Stout, "Early Modern Critics of Tyranny and Oppression," Religion Unbound: Ideals and Powers from Cicero to King. Lecture 2. The Gifford Lectures, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbLNXj0TNEk.

18 Because power is relational and not incremental, Stout avoids speaking of leadership in terms of social capital, which can too easily introduce notions of power in zero-sum terms: Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*, 305n44.

19 I outline and explore the difference between unilateral and relational power in (Stauffer 2024b).

20 Stauffer, *Listening to the Spirit*, chapter 4.

21 Alinsky, *Reveille*, 74; *Rules*, 80.

22 Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People*, 22.

23 See note 22 above.

24 Han, McKenna, Oyakawa. *Prisms of the People*, 106.

25 "Leaders accountable to and rooted in a native, engaged, and committed constituency can claim power at the negotiating table that leaders without that constituency cannot." Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People*, 101.

26 Han, McKenna, Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People*, 142.

27 Han, McKenna, Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People*, 122.

28 see chapter 1 in Stauffer, *Listening to the Spirit*.

29 Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*, 102.

30 Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*, 102, emphasis in original.

31 Lizardy-Habji, *Unraveling Religious Leadership*, 21; 48.

32 This approach is inspired by recent work in theology like (Tran 2022); and in social science, (Burawoy 2009, esp. chp. 1).

33 Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling*, 112; 125

34 cf (Rieger 2022), and Rieger's relational understanding of class, as opposed to stratification theories of class.

35 Transformative and critical pedagogy are two broad fields of adult education and pedagogy. For my understanding of transformative pedagogy, I largely draw from the work of Jack Mezirow and authors commenting on his work and influence. For critical pedagogy, I largely refer to the work and influence of Paolo Freire.

36 (Fraser and Honneth 2003), "Institutionalized social order" from (Fraser 2016, pp. 163–78).

37 For commentary on the epistemic and moral aspects of recognition and injustice see (Carbonell 2019, pp. 167–89; Fricker 2007); on the economic and political sides of things see: Fraser and Honeth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*; (Williams 1992).

38 This is not to suggest a "both-and" strategic approach to organizing; power-building strategies are contextual and driven by power-analysis of the context. Still, the larger point stands that the left needs both political and economic power building approaches. See Gary Dorrien's exemplary work here for how this plays about from the late 19th century into contemporary times, (Dorrien 2021).

39 Deep solidarity is a term coined by Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-Lan and developed by Rieger in *Theology in the Capitalocene*. See also, (Rieger and Kwok 2012).

40 Critical reflection is a key term in Jack Merizow's work and transformative pedagogy broadly, cf. (Mezirow 1991, esp. chp. 4); (Kostara et al. 2022, esp. chp. 1), "Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning: In Dialogue with Honeth's Critical Theory," pp. 3–14.

41 Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 102.

[42] For more on deep solidarity, see (Rieger 2024, pp. 89–99).
[43] For more on the capitalocene see (Parenti and Moore 2016).
[44] Vaikousi, Danae. "Freire and Mezirow," 43.
[45] Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 6.
[46] Vaikousi, Danae. "Freire and Mezirow," 44.
[47] Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 111.
[48] I have made this argument in Stauffer, *Listening to the Spirit*.
[49] For more on structure in organizing see Ganz, *People, Power, Change*, chapter 6.
[50] For more on leader-full congregations with a diversity of roles, see Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership*, 94–100.

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Article

Imagining Otherwise: Black Women, Theological Resistance, and Afrofuturist Possibility

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Abstract: "If it wasn't for the women" is a common refrain in Black Church culture, made most popular by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes' sociology of religion work in the 1990s. As conversations grow around a perceived disconnection from the church—particularly among younger generations—many Black congregations and denominations are asking the following question: Where do we go from here? One possible response is to ask the women. Black women have long been central to the sustenance and theological framing of the Black Church. However, many contemporary Black women theologians and church-adjacent writers are reshaping religious discourse in ways that move beyond traditional ecclesial boundaries and into the interiority of Black womanhood. This turn should be considered essential in any reimagining of the Black Church. This paper employs content analysis to examine five contemporary works by Black women thinkers—Candice Benbow, Lyvonne Briggs, Tricia Hersey, EbonyJanice Moore, and Cole Arthur Riley—whose writings reflect Black women's embodied spirituality, theological imagination, cultural meaning-making, and institutional critique within Black religious life. Rather than signaling a decline in moral or spiritual life, their work points to the search for sacred spaces that are more liberative, inclusive, and attuned to lived experience. Through a thematic analysis of Power, Authority, and Institutional Critique; Afrofuturistic Visioning of Faith; Sacred Embodiment and Spiritual Praxis; Language and Rhetorical Strategies; Gender, Sexuality, and Sacred Autonomy; and Liberation, Justice, and Social Transformation, this study contributes to the evolving conversation on Black women's spirituality, leadership in religious spaces, and a possible iteration of the Black Church.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; Black Church; womanist theology; sacred embodiment; spiritual autonomy

1. Introduction

The presence and leadership of Black women within the Black Church and broader religious life is both deeply rooted and continuously unfolding. Across generations, Black women have shaped the theological, organizational, and spiritual fabric of faith communities, often carrying institutional and cultural memory in their bodies. This embodied memory holds the rhythms of tradition: hymns sung, sermons preached, prayers chanted, and decisions made in parking lots and sanctuary pews. It reflects the lived wisdom of sustaining church life, even when official recognition is withheld. Their labor, which has come in many forms, whether physical, financial, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, or some combination of all these forms of labor, has been indispensable to the vitality and survival of the Black Church. Yet, the extent to which their voices are heard in church governance, doctrinal development, or preaching remains an ongoing matter of reflection and tension. While many Black women carry the weight of church operations and increasing numbers

serve as preachers and pastors, their leadership is not always fully affirmed or respected across all congregational contexts. Visibility in the pulpit does not always translate to equitable influence in decision-making or theological authority.

For over a century, scholars and researchers from Du Bois to larger research organizations like the Pew Research Center and Barna Group have studied the Black Church's history, relevance, and trends (Barna Group 2021; Du Bois 1899; Parker 2022; Pew Research Center 2021). Long before institutional recognition, Black women shaped the theological and spiritual landscape of Black communities that became the Black Church, as we know it. Black women like Jarena Lee, the first authorized female preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Lee 1849), Maria Stewart, one of the earliest American women to speak publicly on religion and race (Richardson 1987), and Harriet Tubman, whose visions and prophetic faith fueled her abolitionist mission (Taylor-Stinson 2023), all reflect a deep lineage of Black women's spiritual leadership. According to the Pew Research Center 2021 report *Faith Among Black Americans*, Black women remain more deeply connected to the Black Church than other demographic groups. The report notes that Black women and U.S.-born Black adults are more likely to turn to religious congregations for assistance than Black men or Black immigrants. This dynamic points to a complex and resilient relationship of both social and spiritual dynamics of the Black people and the Black Church.

This paper emerges from a tradition of womanist inquiry and theological reflection that has long centered the spiritual lives and institutional experiences of Black women. In conversation about the development of this work, Reverend Dr. Marsha Brown Woodard of Palmer Theological Seminary offered a grounding insight: "This work is not new, but the fact that you have some places to look and resources to access is new" (Marsha Brown Woodard, personal communication, 4 November 2024). Woodard's observation speaks to the legacy of Black women's scholarship, and the growing availability of tools to more fully engage with the work created by or written about Black women and the Black Church is impactful. As a part of a long legacy of scholars thinking about the work of Black women, I now have many generations of resources to engage with.

The words of American Christian womanist ethicist, Emilie Townes, further frames this inquiry. During a February 2025 public theology event, Townes invoked James Baldwin's *The Price of the Ticket*, reminding listeners that the Black Church tradition calls for a periodic invitation to "do our first works over," which means to return to our foundations of how things are done (Baldwin 1985, p. 11). Given Baldwin's own fraught relationship with the Black Church, marked by his persistent calls for its accountability and transformation, this invitation is situated not as nostalgia but as a demand for renewal. His critique is part of the Black Church's legacy and, by extension, part of our own. This invitation to return to foundational commitments emerges from some of the Black Church's limitations, such as gendered hierarchies and institutional rigidity, that continue to warrant a redo. The Black Church remains significant to many, yet it stands at a crossroads that calls for reflection and reimagining. The general inquiry-turned-research question of "Where do we go from here?" guides this article. It invites consideration of not only institutional futures but also theological imagination. This paper conducts a content analysis of the first words (e.g., introductions, author notes) of five contemporary texts authored by Black women whose work engages questions of liberation in Black religious and spiritual life. These texts written by Candice Benbow, Lyvonne Briggs, Tricia Hersey, EbonyJanice Moore, and Cole Arthur Riley are theological and ethical interventions, articulating expansive visions for spiritual life that are embodied and rooted in communal care.

While this paper draws upon Afrofuturism as a theoretical lens, it is important to note that Afrofuturism is not inherently religious in its origins. Rather, it is a cultural framework that centers Black culture and futures. As such, it provides a helpful tool for

reimagining the possibilities of Black religious life within the Black Church. Scholars like Mark Dery, Alondra Nelson, and Ytasha Womack have traced Afrofuturism's intellectual grounding to the intersections of Black cultural production, science fiction, technology, and liberationist thought (Dery 1994; Nelson 2000; Womack 2013, 2022). This foundation enables Afrofuturism to serve as an imaginative and critical framework that complements the Black Church's tradition of theological innovation and prophetic vision. Although the five authors analyzed in this study do not explicitly name Afrofuturism as their framework, their theological visions resonate with Afrofuturist themes. This paper does not suggest Afrofuturism as a prescriptive solution, but rather as an interpretive possibility worth considering by the Black Church.

Through the methodological lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this paper explores how these authors construct theological meaning, challenge institutional power, and envision new possibilities for themselves that translate into an offering of religious life that can serve the Black experience and Black Church culture. This paper attends to themes like spiritual agency, sacred embodiment, institutional critique, and Afrofuturistic visioning. "Doing our first works over" then becomes not only a spiritual imperative but a methodological orientation. It demands attentiveness to the voices shaping Black faith today and a willingness to reimagine the Black Church's commitments. Ultimately, this paper affirms that the future of the Black Church may depend, in part, on how it engages and honors the contributions of Black women.

2. Literature Review

The Black Church refers to Protestant, Christian, U.S.-based religious institutions that have historically served as spiritual, cultural, and political anchors in Black communities. Its significance emerges from its dual role as a site of both sacred expression and socio-political resistance. In the context of Black American disenfranchisement, the Black Church stands as a unique institution whose history is entangled with the struggles and aspirations of Black people. This literature review identifies liberation, justice, and social transformation as the central commitments shaping contemporary understandings of the Black Church. These commitments reflect a tradition that must continually reassess its practices considering emerging challenges and insights. Building from this grounding, this review explores five additional key thematic strands that further illuminate how liberation is embodied and renegotiated across Black Church scholarship: Power, Authority, and Institutional Critique; Afrofuturistic Visioning of Faith; Sacred Embodiment and Spiritual Praxis; Language and Rhetorical Strategies; and Gender, Sexuality, and Sacred Autonomy. These themes, which emerge across generations of Black Church scholarship, also serve as the analytical framework for examining the contributions of Benbow (2022), Briggs (2023), Hersey (2022), Moore (2023), and Riley (2024).

2.1. Power, Authority, and Institutional Critique

At the heart of the Black Church's enduring presence is its role as a moral and institutional authority within Black life. Historically, the Black Church has provided refuge from structural violence and served as a hub for organizing, resistance, and cultural affirmation. Yet, its internal dynamics have not been free from critique. The literature reveals that power within the Black Church has often mirrored broader societal hierarchies, reproducing systems of patriarchy and exclusion even while resisting racial oppression. Foundational scholars like Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) conceptualized the Black Church as both a sacred sanctuary and a site of socio-political engagement that expanded the capacity of Black life. Their work highlights the Church's ability to galvanize political action and provide a platform for leadership development. However, scholars like Baldwin (1985) point to

the dual role the Church has played as both a comfort to the oppressed and a site of constraint and institutional authority. Much of both the expansion and constraint oftentimes occurred around Black women as they upheld the financial, social, and daily functions of the Black Church.

Womanist theologians and Black women's studies scholars have long assessed these disconnects of how Black women are rendered invisible in both Black and feminist theological discourses and wider society (Grant 1989; Hull et al. 1982). Riggs (2008) further critiqued the Church's internal dynamics by arguing that its treatment of women often mirrors the oppressive structures of the wider society which created layers of spiritual disenfranchisement. These scholars challenge the assumption that internal power structures within the Black Church are inherently just. Their work insists that the Black women who have supported and sustained the Church must also be seen and heard in its leadership and visioning.

Rather than diminish the Church's historical importance, these critiques clarify the ethical burden of power. They suggest that true authority demands accountability. As the Church gained institutional strength, it became increasingly important to examine how that power was exercised and to whose benefit it was deployed. Du Bois (1899) offered an early articulation of this need in *The Philadelphia Negro*. Black Church is noted not only as a religious space but also as a socio-political one, capable of setting moral standards and influencing public life (Du Bois 1899). This analysis reveals a foundational insight, where the moral credibility of the Black Church rests as much on its internal practices as on its public witness. Scott (2023) continues this line of inquiry, contending that the Black Church's authority must be continually earned through self-examination and transformation. This legacy of internal critique is a sign of moral authority that must continually be earned and re-evaluated.

2.2. Afrofuturistic Visioning of Faith

While institutional critique invites the Black Church to examine its past and present structures, Afrofuturism opens theological and imaginative space for charting new possibilities. Rooted in the cultural and intellectual traditions of the African diaspora, Afrofuturism offers a framework through which the Black Church has and can continue to envision spiritual futures that are expansive and responsive to the complexities of Black life. Afrofuturism centers Black histories and cultures through narratives that often incorporate science fiction, technology, music, and spiritual symbolism (National Museum of African American History and Culture n.d.). It challenges linear notions of time and authority, asserting that Black spiritual life must be free to reconfigure itself beyond traditional constraints. This framework resonates deeply with Black ecclesial spaces that have historically negotiated the interplay between suffering and hope while making meaning from memory and prophecy.

The literary and theological work of Octavia Butler exemplifies this approach. In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler (1993) presents a world in collapse and introduces a new faith system that adapts to rather than resists change. The novel's theological undercurrents reflect a deep engagement with Black Church traditions while also pushing them toward new expressions. Afrofuturism allows the Black Church to reimagine itself as a site for theological understanding and collective liberation while engaging Black aesthetic and ancestral traditions, which include the experiences of Black women (Coleman 2008; Crawley 2016; Pinn 2010; Sneed 2021). These embodied forms of expression reveal the possibility of imagining spirituality outside rigid structures, emphasizing the generative potential of the sensual and ecstatic that only a reimagined experience through a framing like Afrofuturism can bring forward in the face of past and impending marginalization. Rather than dismiss

tradition, Afrofuturism reframes it, suggesting that tradition itself can be reinterpreted considering emergent needs and radical hopes. The plurality inherent in Black religious life reinforces the idea that spiritual authority must remain flexible enough to include marginalized voices and fluid enough to grow with changing communities (Coleman 2020).

Afrofuturistic visioning is a forward-thinking theological approach of faithful accountability that embraces imagining as sacred labor, where Black faith communities reclaim their right to imagine and experience expansive futures. Visioning alone, however, is not enough. Like the experience of Black people in the United States, the work must be rooted in lived, embodied realities. For the Black Church to be a site of radical imagination, it must address how faith is experienced through and within the body. This is not a metaphysical abstraction within a future galaxy. It is here in the aching joints of church mothers, the strained smiles of first ladies, the heavy shoulders of preachers, and the speech-giving angst of children in white on Easter Sunday. Throughout years of Black building, destruction, and rebuilding, the Black experience has been largely imaginative as a theological strategy of survival. This study resonates with the imaginative and intergenerational writing of Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2018), whose *M Archive* presents a poetic, speculative theology that emerges from catastrophe and frames dreaming as spiritual practice and political strategy. In *Triumph: Survival Is Not a Theoretical Skill*, Gumbs (2024) presents, "So it is better to radically hope and dream. So it is better to dream and imagine otherwise," underscoring the spiritual and political stakes of Black visionary work. To "imagine otherwise" affirms Afrofuturism's invitation to survive as a sacred act.

2.3. Sacred Embodiment and Spiritual Praxis

The body becomes a vessel for divine truth to be experienced and expressed. Womanist scholars extend these ideas by emphasizing the epistemological and ethical importance of embodied spiritual practices, acts of daily survival and self-reclamation that are essential for discernment and transformation in the lives of Black women (Floyd-Thomas 2006; Walker 1983). Weems (2000) adds depth by attending to interiority, naming silence, doubt, and emotional struggle as valid and sacred aspects of the spiritual journey. These scholars affirm that sacred embodiment is at the core of faith and that the body holds wisdom. Whether through dance, prayer, healing, or lament, Black religious practice insists that to be spiritual is also to be present in the body. This calls the Black Church to a more holistic approach to worship and care that centers physical and emotional well-being, honors bodies, and sees theological reflection as intertwined with lived experiences (Ammerman 2021).

Across the literature, embodiment emerges as a central dimension of Black Christian spirituality, challenging traditions that separate holiness from the physical self. The body, scholars argue, is not a hindrance to divine encounter but a sacred site where Black suffering, memory, resistance, and joy reside (Douglas [1999] 2025; Floyd-Thomas 2006; Lomax 2018; Mitchem 2007). Rather than abstract notions of spirit, Black religious life has consistently affirmed that the flesh bears theological weight.

This insight is particularly urgent in the context of Black women's experiences, where theological ideals have too often demanded strength without rest and virtue without vulnerability. Walker-Barnes (2014) critiques these norms, urging a redefinition of strength that includes soft restfulness and shared responsibility. Similarly, Lomax (2025) interrogates the surveillance and moral regulation of Black women's bodies and lives in religious contexts across the lifespan. Their work reveals how spiritual praxis must contend with the burdens placed on Black women's bodies and recognize their stories as central to divine revelation.

Douglas ([1999] 2025) echoes these concerns by reframing sexuality and embodiment not as moral threats but as essential components of human dignity. Calling for a sexual

ethic within the Black Church, Douglas insists on accountability and affirmation rather than silence or shame. Mitchem (2007) offers a complementary lens through her study of African American folk healing, illuminating how rituals such as herbal medicine, touch, and communal care enact a holistic spirituality beyond institutional spaces. In these traditions, healing is not simply spiritual but bodily and relational, reflecting a theology lived through care.

If Afrofuturism expands theological imagination toward radical futures, sacred embodiment grounds that vision in the lived experiences of Black life. The Black Church has long nurtured a faith that is not only doctrinal but deeply embodied, evident in the rhythm of the sermon, the choreography of praise dance, the moan of a prayer warrior, or the laying on of hands. These embodied expressions are not merely performative but theological acts that reflect how the Black Church lives through embodied traditions and lived faith. Building on the wider field of womanist theological inquiry, scholars such as Angela Parker (2021), Yolanda Pierce (2021), and Eboni Marshall Turman (2013) illuminate the complexities of Black women's sacred lives. Their work calls attention to how biblical authority, ancestral memory, and institutional power shape both the affirmation and erasure of Black women's spiritual agency. Taken together, they underscore the urgency of theological frameworks that are embodied and intergenerationally accountable, offering a bridge between lived experience and the sacred language that gives it voice.

2.4. Language and Rhetorical Strategies

In the Black Church, the spoken word holds sacred power, where language and its delivery are not merely vehicles for theology, but a theology of their own. Through preaching, prayer, testimony, and song, words carry belief, evoke memory, make meaning, and call communities into action. This rich rhetorical tradition, deeply embedded in oral culture, serves as a medium through which the Church teaches and transforms. The cadence, rhythm, and emotive resonance of Black religious speech form a distinctive theological expression, one that marries cultural specificity with spiritual authority. Scholars trace this tradition to the lived realities of Black life. Baldwin (1985) captures this dynamic by showing how sermonic language emerges directly from the conditions of Black existence, reflecting both pain and possibility. Even as he maintained a critical stance toward the Black Church and some would say institutionalized religion in general, Baldwin's own sermonic style, shaped by lament and prophetic critique, reflects the cadence and emotive power of Black preaching. His use of moral inquiry and cultural indictment demonstrates how deeply the rhetorical forms of the Church shaped his public voice, despite his distance from traditional doctrine. Rather than distancing itself from vernacular expression, the Black Church elevates everyday language into sacred proclamation. This dynamic orality is essential and provides a sense of survival and hope. Many scholars anchor this expressive form within the broader African American cultural production, arguing that rhetorical flair in the Black Church functions as a theological gesture (Du Bois 1903; Gates 2021). Preaching becomes both performance and proclamation, conveying spiritual truth through rhythm and emotion. This aesthetic and intellectual tradition shapes not only how theology is communicated but how it is felt and lived.

Womanist scholars extend this analysis by centering the rhetorical labor of Black women. Johnson (2017) and Mitchell and Davis (2008) highlight how Black women preachers develop a distinct homiletic through a blend of personal narrative, communal insight, and biblical interpretation. Their sermons are both intimate and prophetic, offering spiritual depth while resisting binary thinking and inviting justice-centered imagination. Sacred language also thrives beyond the pulpit. Rodgers (1975), writing at the intersection of the Black Church and the Black Arts Movement, uses poetry to express grief, joy, insight, and

resistance, showing that theology can emerge through art grounded in the Black experience. Gilkes (2001) expands this view by underscoring the spiritual authority Black women exercise in kitchens, prayer circles, and community gatherings, where everyday leadership and sacred wisdom are cultivated. Whether through sermon, personal testimony, poetry, or conversation, rhetorical strategies are core to how Black faith is communicated and embodied. This tradition invites deeper reflection on how the Black Church's language serves not merely to interpret Scripture, but to construct spiritual identity and sustain cultural memory.

2.5. Gender, Sexuality, and Sacred Autonomy

The Black Church has depended on the labor, leadership, and spiritual insight of women and LGBTQ+ persons, even as its theological and institutional frameworks have often constrained their full participation. This theme explores how evolving discourse around gender, sexuality, and sacred autonomy challenges the Church to reimagine inclusion not as accommodation but as a spiritual and ethical necessity. While earlier sections examined embodiment and rhetorical agency, this theme centers the affirmation of gender and sexual diversity. The literature consistently highlights how gendered power dynamics have shaped the internal life of Black religious communities. Brown (2008) and Gilkes (2001) document the essential roles that Black women have played in sustaining church infrastructure through ministry, education, finance, and caregiving. Their work underscores the paradox of prominence without authority. Many Black women are often celebrated for their service but excluded from formal decision-making spaces.

Womanist theologians assert that Black women's lived experiences must inform the ethical and theological foundations of the Church. Weems (2003) and Walker-Barnes (2014) contend that autonomy is not a rejection of spirituality but a spiritual practice. Through reclaiming agency over their bodies, stories, and vocations, Black women model a faith rooted in justice, integrity, and self-determination. Their scholarship reframes autonomy as essential to collective liberation rather than a threat to religious order, offering theological frameworks that affirm complexity, resist erasure, and demand ethical accountability from religious institutions. This includes womanist biblical interpretations that center Black women's lived realities as sacred sources of meaning (Smith 2015) and reimagining Scripture in ways that elevate Black women as integral to faithful reading (Gafney 2017, 2024). Cooper (2017, 2018) highlights the importance of Black women's intellectual traditions and framing rage as a catalyst for spiritual truth-telling and communal liberation. Building on this foundation, Douglas ([1999] 2025) and Lomax (2018) challenge the Church's historical approach to sexuality. Sexual ethics shaped by shame-filled silence and control undermine the dignity of those they intend to guide. Scholars call for a theology that honors the body as sacred and moves toward an embodied ethic of liberation grounded in accountability and even pleasure (brown 2019).

These conversations are further expanded through the inclusion of LGBTQ+ voices and experiences. Ministry exemplifies a theological praxis that is radically inclusive while remaining rooted in Black Church traditions. Her life and leadership call the Church to embody the justice it preaches, not only in public witness but in its internal culture and relationships. Scott et al. (2024) offer empirical insight into this theological mandate by examining the experiences of transgender young adults in religious spaces. Their findings reveal that conditional acceptance often causes harm, while genuinely inclusive communities cultivate belonging, resilience, and spiritual growth. Townes et al. (2022), drawing from the legacy of Katie Geneva Cannon, emphasize that justice must be enacted in daily life and felt in the body. Their work promotes concrete commitments to human flourishing. Within this framework, sacred autonomy is not limited to personal freedom

but reshapes Church culture in a way that reflects the full humanity of all people and honors difference as a site of divine encounter.

This theme makes it clear that liberation within the Black Church cannot be selective. While there are many notes of positivity within the Black Church legacy, to remain a site of prophetic witness, the Black Church must grapple with how its doctrines and practices have harmed many people. Sacred autonomy calls faith communities to recognize gender and sexual diversity as gifts that deepen theological understanding and enrich communal life. According to this body of scholarship, the future of the Black Church rests on its willingness to fully embrace the complexity of Black identity and to affirm the sacredness of everybody.

2.6. Liberation, Justice, and Social Transformation

This final theme draws together the threads of embodiment, autonomy, vision, and voice into a broader theological and ethical commitment. Liberation, justice, and social transformation have long defined the Black Church's mission. From the hush harbors and praise houses of enslavement to the sanctuaries of the civil rights movement, the Church has served as both refuge and catalyst. This tradition of faith-rooted resistance offers a powerful legacy, yet the literature urges a deeper interrogation of its limits and future possibilities.

Black Americans continue to view the Church as a vital force for racial justice. According to Pew Research Center (2021), many believe it has played an important role in the struggle for equality in the United States. Still, scholars caution against uncritical celebration. Du Bois (1924) and Gates (2021) affirm the Church's socio-political significance but remind us that its institutional power is neither uncontested nor inherently liberative. The potential for transformation always exists alongside the risk of complacency and exclusion.

When viewed through the lens of labor and gender, the tension increases, especially when examining the cost of justice work within the Church, particularly for Black women whose contributions often go unrecognized (Coleman 2008; Lomax 2018; Walker-Barnes 2014). Their research reveals how marginalization and unequal labor expectations diminish the Church's liberatory witness. In spring 2025, Jessie Washington, a PhD candidate at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, expressed the concept of existential exhaustion during their dissertation defense. In conversation with the theory of weathering, existential exhaustion underscores the physical and emotional toll borne by Black women in need of mental and physical liberation (Geronimus 2020). Calls for transformation from within are central to the Black Liberation Theology tradition that insists that theology begins with the lived conditions of the oppressed (Cone 1970; Hopkins 2014). Liberation requires not only changes in outward practices but also in the underlying beliefs and ways of thinking that shape them, including within religious communities.

Womanist theologians carry this vision forward by centering Black women's lives in theological reflection. They affirm that survival, creativity, and care are not merely coping strategies but vital theological resources shaping a collective, embodied ethic of liberation (Cannon 1995; Townes 2006; Williams 1993). For generations, womanist scholarship has contended that the Church must go beyond including Black women. It must be transformed by their wisdom. This scholarship is echoed in the work of West (2006) and Williams (2014), who link Black Christian ethics to global justice movements. West critiques theological traditions that have ignored the lived realities of Black women, while Williams (2014) traces the influence of Black Church theology on global figures like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. These perspectives highlight the Church's potential to serve not only as a moral compass but as a partner in global movements for dignity and freedom. Offering models of justice-centered ministries, public theologians integrate pastoral care, political organizing, and prophetic

witness (Barber 2021; Flunder 2005). Together, these scholars and leaders insist that the Black Church move beyond memory. Its history of resistance must inform its present commitments and future direction. Liberation is an ongoing process that calls for consistent ethical reflection and institutional accountability to the conditions under which people live.

2.7. Synthesis

These six themes reflect the complexity, contradiction, and creativity that has long defined the Black Church as both a spiritual anchor and a site of theological and sociopolitical contestation. As a result, the Black Church has been seen as a living, evolving community shaped by memory, power, imagination, and hope. Across the literature, Afrofuturism emerges not always as an explicit framework. However, Afrofuturism has been present in the Black Church's commitment to envisioning alternative futures beyond racialized oppression, while reimagining both sacred time and collective liberation. Some may view Afrofuturism as speculative or disconnected from the Black Church, because of its association with science fiction and fantasy. However, at the Black Church's core are the principles of radical imagination, historical preservation and recovery, and future-oriented theology. Afrofuturism challenges linear temporality and centers Black cultural production as a vehicle for liberation and transformation (English 2017). Evident in Black preaching, eschatology, music, and ritual are expressions of the Black Church's capacity to honor the past while simultaneously building toward liberatory futures and imaginative possibilities, which is also at the heart of Afrofuturistic thought (Pratt Institute Libraries 2024; Womack 2013). This study also points to a tension between the formal boundaries of denominational structures and the more embodied and imaginative forms of spirituality that many contemporary writers are exploring. While these emerging expressions may not always fit neatly within traditional church frameworks, they reflect concepts that the Black Church must take seriously.

3. Results

Through a narrative thematic analysis of the introductory sections of five texts authored by Black women in the early 2020s, six salient themes emerged: Power, Authority, and Institutional Critique; Afrofuturistic Visioning of Faith; Sacred Embodiment and Spiritual Praxis; Language and Rhetorical Strategies; Gender, Sexuality, and Sacred Autonomy; and Liberation, Justice, and Social Transformation. Although the authors did not co-author a collective theological framework, their voices resonate in shared concerns and visionary commitments to justice, rest, and liberation, especially for Black women and gender-expansive individuals navigating the sacred. Afrofuturism is named directly in only one theme. However, I contend that Afrofuturist thought operates as a through line across the remaining five themes. Each subsection of the Results section concludes with a reflection highlighting how Afrofuturist sensibilities inform the thematic area, even when not explicitly named. These reflections position Afrofuturism as a through line shaping both the analysis and the theological vision emerging from these thematic areas.

3.1. Power, Authority, and Institutional Critique

Each author interrogates institutional religion's failure to protect and affirm Black lives—especially Black women. Benbow (2022) critiques an ecclesial practice that deprioritizes Black women, writing "I had been reared in a faith tradition which largely existed to give Black men the status and power White people refused them in larger society" (p. xxiv). Moore (2023) exposes theological gatekeeping, desiring her work to be "a door flung open in institutions that prefer locks and gatekeepers" (p. xvi). Riley (2024) denounces the harms of white Christianity and evangelicalism, noting "We weren't as safe in church as

we thought" (p. xv). These critiques resist total institutional dismissal while calling for radical reformation. Afrofuturism's commitment to dismantling hegemonic systems and constructing new possibilities aligns with the authors' rejection of oppressive cultural and institutional norms, offering not only resistance but an affective shift toward affirmation of the embodied self (Young-Scaggs 2022; Zamalin 2022).

3.2. Afrofuturistic Visioning of Faith

These authors reimagine faith through futures imbued with Black spiritual imagination. Moore (2023) invites readers to dream beyond resistance: "This wave of womanism is asking of our politics: What would a revolution that does not cost us our whole spirit, soul, and bodies look like?" (p. xxiv). Hersey (2022) envisions rest as a sacred portal, writing "Rest is a healing portal to our deepest selves" (p. 7). Riley (2024) aligns liturgy with liberation: "Every word... has been written... with an imagination for collective healing, rest, and liberation" (p. xviii). In *Black to the Future*, Dery (1994) notes "The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antimony: Can a community whose past has been rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures" (p. 180). Collectively, these authors cast visions that resist despair and offer sacred blueprints for a more just world.

3.3. Sacred Embodiment and Spiritual Praxis

Embodiment is honored as sacred and revolutionary. Briggs (2023) writes "the countless sermons I had heard preached about how evil women are and how our bodies must be tamed no longer fit the woman I was becoming" (p. xvi), situating the body as both theological and testimonial. Benbow (2022) uses Red Lip theology to fully express oneself using outside affirmations, stating "these essays fully embody what these beauty practices uncovered for me and frame what I hope will be a progressive faith dialogue for millennial Black women" (p. xxxii). Hersey (2022) presents rest and her work as spiritual praxis: "This book is a testimony and testament of my refusal to donate my body to a system that still owes a debt to my Ancestors for the theft of their labor and DreamSpace. I refuse to push my body to the brink of exhaustion and destruction" (p. 4). While Hersey resists grind culture, EbonyJanice Moore (2023) will "focus on contributing to a canon of knowledge around what enfleshed freedom will look like in our very worthy bodies, today" (p. xix). Like how Afrofuturist theory informs embodied spiritual practices grounded in self-valuation, this theme resists grind culture by reclaiming Black bodies as sacred sites of both present resistance and future possibility.

3.4. Language and Rhetorical Strategies

The language used by these authors is culturally situated and unapologetically Black. Moore (2023) declares "Every line in this book is for the ones who easily understand what I mean when I say Bitch. (with a period)" (p. xxv), establishing both cultural fluency and spiritual depth. Benbow (2022) writes with a theological language and understanding of a core theological concept "womanist theology didn't feel like it was created for women like me: sisters who didn't tuck in their ratchetness in favor of righteousness to occupy certain spaces and get in certain rooms" (p. xxv), resisting respectability politics. Briggs (2023) uses liturgical that turns the concept of what people have been conditioned to think on its head: "I am a body-and sex-positive pastor. . .I am a Black woman spiritual leader who is no longer at war with her body" (p. xv). These rhetorical strategies create spiritual intimacy while rejecting theological elitism, which is a form of Afrofuturistic praxis. As seen by seminal writers, like Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany, the authors echo Afrofuturism's commitment to reimagining language as a tool for cultural survival and resistance (Ye 2025).

3.5. Gender, Sexuality, and Sacred Autonomy

Autonomy, gender expansiveness, and queer spirituality are centered. Moore (2023) writes "If you see your lived experience inside Black-girl culture... know I mean you too" (p. xxiv), signaling radical inclusion. Riley (2024) affirms queerness in all art forms by leaning on the poetry of Lucille Clifton and noting that "good art is necessarily queer—fluid and subversive and impermanent" (p. xiii). Briggs (2023) asserts her broad theological understanding by highlighting that "God is not bound by gender. God is big enough to be 'her'" (p. xvii). These authors model sacred autonomy rooted in authenticity and Afrofuturistic thought's radical inclusivity, where gender and sexuality are integral to spiritual wholeness and selfhood reclamation (Johnson 2020; Mougoué 2021).

3.6. Liberation, Justice, and Social Transformation

Across these texts, liberation is both a spiritual and social imperative. Benbow (2022) insists that Black girls "deserve a faith free from the pressure of a perfection impossible to obtain" (p. xxii). Riley (2024) frames her spirituality as liberative at its core: "If this book has loyalty to anything, it is to spiritual liberation in all its incarnations and complexities" (p. xvi-xvii). Hersey (2022) links collective rest to collective freedom: "Our bodies are a site of liberation. . . The Rest is Resistance movement is a connection and a path back to our true nature. We are stripped down to who we really were before the terror of capitalism and white supremacy. We are enough. We are divine." (p. 7). Imagination and creativity are hallmarks of Afrofuturist thought (Dery 1994). These authors imagine and enact liberation through a fusion of spiritual and social liberation.

4. Discussions

The themes identified in these texts reflect an emergent theological movement grounded in Black womanist spirituality, sacred resistance, and radical self-love. The authors challenge congregational leaders not only to listen, but to re-examine and re-structure with intention: Who is centered in worship? Who is protected in theology? What is sanctified through institutional norms? Their work reclaims sacred space through story-telling, rest, and spiritual autonomy. Benbow (2022) asserts a need for spiritual freedom to coexist with personal wholeness, while Briggs (2023) offers a queered, poetic vision of liturgy as resistance. Hersey's (2022) insistence that exhaustion will not be her legacy, while providing an embodied model of rest theology, challenges capitalistic patterns that remain embedded in many congregational routines. While Moore (2023) and Riley (2024) draw from congregational liturgies and theological analysis, they expand these traditions to more fully honor the needs of Black women today, rather than the assumptions of generations past. While each brings a unique lens to Black faith and spirituality, they share overlapping commitments that affirm the next generation of Black religious leaders and congregations. Practically, this calls faith leaders to

- Reimagine liturgical and preaching practices by centering rest, embodiment, and communal healing;
- Integrate womanist theology and queer-inclusive frameworks into Bible studies, leadership development, worship planning, and nontraditional formats (e.g., social media), ensuring such integration is guided by theological training and care;
- Use storytelling and confession as pastoral tools for communal transformation;
- Prioritize wellness and ease as theological commitments, not afterthoughts.

These authors affirm that Black sacred futures require truth-telling, rest, and a rejection of shame-filled, survival-only theologies. They offer readers and congregations a map toward a faith that holds space for sacred rage, soft joy, queer becoming, and Black girl

breath. As leaders reflect on what it means to shepherd with integrity, these texts serve as blueprints that present themselves as part protest and part prayer.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Content Analysis and Its Importance

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a qualitative content analysis method to examine how Black Church-adjacent writers construct religious and theological frameworks that challenge, reimagine, or expand faith traditions. As a form of content analysis, CDA goes beyond thematic identification by interrogating how power and ideological discourse shape religious meaning-making (Fairclough 1995; Krippendorff 2018; Neuendorf 2017; van Dijk 1993). This study considers the "Black Church" not only as a physical institution but also as a global, dispersed community of believers and cultural expressions shaped by shared memory and culture. By integrating an Afrofuturist lens, this approach investigates how these texts envision new spiritual possibilities while centering Black women's agency and resisting institutional power structures. This study focuses on book introductions, prefaces, and author notes by Candice Benbow, Lyvonne Briggs, Tricia Hersey, EbonyJanice Moore, and Cole Arthur Riley. These are all authors whose theological perspectives are shaped by Black feminist and/or womanist thought, as well as imaginative traditions that explore new spiritual possibilities and liberated futures. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this work, CDA enables a nuanced analysis of how language, authority, embodiment, and futurism operate in these texts (Gee 2014; Bryman 2016). The coding framework is structured to capture key analytical categories found in the literature review, including Power, Authority, and Institutional Critique; Afrofuturistic Visioning of Faith; Sacred Embodiment and Spiritual Praxis; Language and Rhetorical Strategies; Gender, Sexuality, and Sacred Autonomy; and Liberation, Justice, and Social Transformation. These categories were developed inductively from prior theoretical scholarship and refined through an initial open coding process.

5.2. Author Selection

This paper turns toward a group of Black women thinkers and writers whose work reimagines sacredness, embodiment, rest, and ritual as essential elements in Black spiritual life. While they may not always write from within formal theological institutions or explicitly identify as theologians in the traditional sense, these five writers—Candice Marie Benbow, Lyvonne Briggs, Tricia Hersey, EbonyJanice Moore, and Cole Arthur Riley—nonetheless engage the language, symbols, and spirit of the Black Church and broader Black religious traditions. Their work is rich with sacred vocabulary, infused with practices rooted in spirituality, and committed to the care and liberation of Black people.

These women are what I describe as "Black Church-adjacent." They are deeply informed by the Black religious experience, shaped by Christian traditions, and theologically trained or spiritually grounded in ways that position them as critical voices in charting the future of Black faith. Four of the five hold degrees from prominent theological institutions. Benbow earned a Master of Divinity from Duke Divinity School. Briggs holds degrees from both Yale Divinity School and Columbia Theological Seminary. Hersey graduated from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Moore holds an M.A. in Social Change with a concentration in Spiritual Leadership and Womanist Theology. While Cole Arthur Riley does not hold formal theological credentials at the time of this research, her writings reflect a deep engagement with liturgical tradition and contemplative practice, drawing from prayer, lament, and meditation as spiritual technologies for survival and healing. Each of these authors brings a sacred orientation.

- Candice Marie Benbow, in *Red Lip Theology*, weaves personal narrative with theological reflection, engaging the Black Church as both formative and fraught. Her work centers Black women's spirituality, beauty, and resilience, framed by her training at Duke Divinity School and shaped by her upbringing in the Black Church.
- Lyvonne Briggs, in *Sensual Faith*, reclaims sensuality and embodiment as sacred, inviting readers to come home to their bodies as sites of divine encounter. Her theological education and grounding provide a rich backdrop for this reclamation.
- Tricia Hersey, the "Nap Bishop" and founder of the Nap Ministry, redefines rest as resistance in a culture of overwork. A graduate of Emory University's Candler School of Theology, Hersey draws on her theological training in her *Rest is Resistance* manifesto, employing religious language such as bishop, ministry, and Sabbath to position rest as a sacred and radical act.
- EbonyJanice Moore, in *All the Black Girls are Activists*, writes at the intersections of womanist theology, spiritual leadership, and racial justice. Her theological and cultural commentary open new pathways for spiritual expression and Black liberation.
- Cole Arthur Riley, in *Black Liturgies*, offers prayers, poems, and meditations that speak directly to the depth of Black life. Her writing is contemplative and evocative, inviting a deeper spiritual attentiveness grounded in the Black tradition. Her work reflects a profound understanding of Black spirituality.

These voices were selected not only for their theological or spiritual credibility but also because they offer a textured, embodied, and communal vision of Black spirituality that reaches beyond the academy or pulpit. They stand as important guides in answering the question, *where do we go from here?* They fulfill this role not through dogma, but through reflection, ritual, and resistance. Their work honors the legacy of the Black Church while pointing to its evolving contours, showing how sacred language and practice continue to be reimagined in our time.

5.3. Content Analysis of Five Works

This study focuses on the opening sections—introductions, author notes, and early framing pages—of five works written by Black Church-adjacent women. These beginnings offer theological and spiritual insights that ground each author's message and mission. Rather than serving as prefaces, author's notes, or simple introductions, these sections act as theological declarations that establish vision. Each of these texts, through their openings, marks a powerful entry into contemporary theological discourse. These authors ground their work in lived experience, centering Black women's healing and agency as essential to the future of Black faith and spirituality.

5.4. Coding Procedures, Reliability, and Triangulation

This study was conducted through an iterative, open coding and thematic analysis process grounded in Black feminist theology, Afrofuturism, and Critical Discourse Analysis. Key themes emerged through close and multiple readings of the core five texts, focusing on theological reflection, rhetorical strategies, and visionary constructions. Reflexive journaling and repeated engagement with both the data and theory ensured analytic rigor and alignment with the conceptual frameworks of the article. By drawing on multiple authors, traditions, and interpretive lenses to produce a nuanced synthesis of contemporary Black religious thought, triangulation was prioritized.

6. Conclusions

This study affirms that the future of Black religious life, and the Black Church in particular, depends on how it chooses to hear, honor, and engage the evolving spiritual

visions of Black women. The six themes that emerged from the content analysis (Power, Authority, and Institutional Critique; Afrofuturistic Visioning of Faith; Sacred Embodiment and Spiritual Praxis; Language and Rhetorical Strategies; Gender, Sexuality, and Sacred Autonomy; and Liberation, Justice, and Social Transformation) demonstrate that Black women writers are constructing theological blueprints, grounded in lived experience and imaginative resistance.

While this study centers Black women, their insights offer renewed theological frameworks that can enrich the broader body of believers by deepening liberative faith practices. These authors write within the sacred narrative, reshaping its contours and raising questions that center embodied liberation and communal flourishing. Their work reflects a broader yearning in Black spiritual life to move beyond survival. In response, congregational leaders are invited to engage this moment through the imaginative possibilities offered by Afrofuturist thought, which is rooted in cultural memory, Black creativity, and theological innovation. This is not a call for superficial programming shifts but for spiritual and institutional transformation. Black women are building new altars where breath, body, lament, rage, pleasure, prayer, and protest are all welcome and holy.

Future Directions

There remain significant opportunities for future research and practice that center Black women's spiritual imagination. While this study used content analysis, further inquiry might include ethnographic studies of faith communities engaged in reimagining church through Afrofuturistic or womanist lenses. Storytelling circles, embodied rituals, oral histories, and participatory action research could offer more dynamic methods for understanding how communities are responding to the shifts that these writers name. Future scholarship must continue to explore how the Black Church can serve as a site of transformation that nurtures justice, sustains sacred autonomy, and affirms the embodied lives and diverse experiences of its people.

Faith communities are encouraged to ask grounded and contextual questions. What does our neighborhood need? Who is in our wake? What does creation (human and beyond human) need to feel free, seen, and whole? What does faith look like when it does not extract but restores? This also means discerning where congregational closure may be holy. Some congregations may face dignified endings. Others may choose to shed theologies or structures that no longer serve. Yet even in death, there is a witness. The invitation is to co-create what could be. Black women must remain central in this process, not as spiritual laborers expected to give without rest or reciprocity, but as theologians, visionaries, and whole persons. As traditional models evolve, we must resist asking another generation to sacrifice themselves on the altar of tradition and institutional preservation. Instead, we are called to honor their breath, their rest, their sacred stories, and their dreams. Whether the Black Church becomes a site of renewed thriving or a monument to what was, its significance endures.

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Article

The Congregation as Retreat Center and Intentional Community: Pastoral Sensemaking in an Age of Individualization

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Abstract: Drawing from narrative interviews with eight Protestant pastors in the U.S. and Canada, this paper explores community-building under the conditions of late modernity through the lenses of individualization and sensemaking. Exploring pastoral approaches to what Ulrich Beck calls "institutionalized individualism", this paper argues that pastoral sensemaking manages polarities between the societal demand for self-construction and the human need to belong, between an individual's freedom to make a life (or god) of their own and the fact that such work requires a community. Pastoral leaders manage this polarity through sensemaking strategies that strengthen and clarify the central values and practices of the congregation while also managing the boundaries of the congregation, envisioning the congregation as a retreat center in some cases and as an intentional community in others. In an age of individualization, pastoral leadership requires the dexterity to move between dynamic collective and individual identities, making processes of belonging a collaborative sensemaking effort in which boundaries are drawn, enacted, erased, and redrawn in new ways.

Keywords: pastoral leadership; sensemaking in organizations; individualization; Ulrich Beck; Karl Weick; voluntarism

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, participation in voluntary associations and congregations has been in steep decline. In books like *Bowling Alone* and the subsequent research it inspired, Robert Putnam and others have assembled a wide range of explanations for this phenomenon (Putnam 2000; Lim and Putnam 2010; Gamm and Putnam 1999). Americans have more leisure and entertainment options than fifty years ago. Changes in family structure and economic pressures have resulted in more two-income families and single-parent households than in previous eras. The gig economy makes regular participation in church and voluntary associations more difficult. Somewhat neglected in this conversation are the structural dimensions of late modernity, which seem to make *joining anything* a heroic act of resistance. We live in, what Derek Thompson has termed, the "Anti-Social Century", characterized, not by loneliness, but rather a self-chosen isolation (Thompson 2025). In an era of screen-mediated relationships, political polarization, and diminished civil society, cultivating community is not only a struggle but something that runs against the grain of modern experience.

The challenge is deeper, however, than social media habits or our post-pandemic preference for introversion. Contemporary life is structured around the individual quest for meaning and identity, a process sociologists call "individualization" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The institutions, social arrangements, and narratives of late modernity

have cut us off from the communities which once provided a sense of belonging and identity, such as church, family, and neighborhood, placing us within an impossible—but also exhilarating—contradiction. We are both free and bound. We are free to construct our own sense of self but also bound to social structures that make self-construction a never-ending, open-ended, life-long project. We are free to elect the communities we might join, and yet the elective nature of such joining mitigates against the social stability promised by belonging. As creatures of a previous voluntarist era, congregations are not well-adapted to late modernity.[1] What does community-building look like in our age of individualization?

Drawing from narrative interviews with eight Protestant pastors in the U.S. and Canada, this paper explores community-building under the conditions of late modernity through the lenses of individualization and sensemaking. I argue that pastoral sensemaking in an age of individualization embraces the contradictions of late modernity by managing the polarity between self-construction and community-building, between an individual's freedom to make a life (or god) of their own and the fact that such work requires a community. Pastoral leaders manage this polarity through sensemaking strategies that strengthen and clarify the central values and practices of the congregation while also managing the boundaries of the congregation, envisioning the congregation as a retreat center in some cases and as an intentional community in others. In an age of individualization, pastoral leadership requires the dexterity to move between dynamic collective and individual identities, making processes of belonging a collaborative sensemaking effort in which boundaries are drawn, enacted, erased, and redrawn in new ways.

2. Religion in an Age of Individualization

For decades, sociologists have tried to name and understand the strange form of disconnection and disorientation that characterizes life in the modern West. High levels of societal differentiation between family, work, neighborhood, leisure activities, religion, etc. grant us a great deal of personal freedom. We are "disembedded" from the old structures that once determined the shape and direction of our lives and set free in a world of possibility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. xxi). But freedom comes with a cost. Free from the old structures, we are burdened with possibility and choice, deciding who we are and will be, what we will do and what it all means.[2] At one level, congregations in the United States have always had to cultivate and form community under these conditions. The voluntarist nature of congregational life pits congregations against one another in a competition for participants, donations, and volunteers (Finke and Stark 1992). Unlike some other Western contexts, the United States inherited an audience-centered and entrepreneurial religious sector (Hatch 1989, pp. 9–12). But at another level, things have changed in the last several decades. Younger generations of churchgoers do not attend church with the same frequency. Church membership rolls struggle to keep members engaged. Modernity has intensified and the disembedding processes of a differentiated society have led to a heightened and radicalized form of voluntarism.[3] We might choose to volunteer or attend church, but we are much less likely to join or participate with consistency.

According to the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, such changes to patterns of joining and belonging must be understood at the structural level rather than the individual level. In other words, we do not freely choose a life of endless possibility; we have been set adrift by the institutions and social realities of late modern life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). For, unlike previous eras, identity is not granted or given to a person by way of traditional or institutional constraints, such as class or religion or village or family. Rather, identity is a life-long project that is *reflexive* rather than reflective.[4] Disembedded from traditional or institutional pathways for identity, we individuals have no place from

which to stand, no solid earth upon which to plant our feet and reflect upon our lives or to construct our biography. Beck calls this "institutionalized individualism"[5] (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 12). It is a form of individualism thrust upon us and sustained—even amplified—by the institutions of late modernity. While it can be confused for the autonomous individualism promised by neoliberalism, it is not the same thing.[6] For, rather than cultivate a self-sufficient individualism, the institutional and relational complexities of everyday life make us "self-*in*sufficient" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. xxi). We have the freedom to construct a self (as promised by neoliberal economics), but the same structures that free or disembed us also deny meaningful integration. We are employees and little league coaches and parents and consumers who are "constantly changing between different, partly incompatible logics of action [and] forced to take into [our] hands that which is in danger of breaking into pieces: [our] own lives" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 23). In this, we are "*forced to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions*" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. xxii). Individualization, then, is neither a choice nor a solitary effort, but rather a fact of modern life cultivated by modern institutions which direct each of us to create, as Beck says, "a life of one's own" together.

Beck's theory of individualization bears similarities to several other accounts of modern life. In moral philosophy, Alistair MacIntyre connects the moral incoherence of modern life with high levels of institutional differentiation. Lives broken up into different fragments are not able to be pulled together into a meaningful, integrated, and coherent account of the good life (MacIntyre 2007). In sociology, Zygmunt Bauman describes the "liquid" stage of modernity, where the solid social structures that once guided our lives have melted and become more fluid, less secure. The liquification of once-secure institutions, such as family, class, and religion, cast us adrift in a sea of possibilities, but without any objects on the horizon by which we might navigate. As Bauman says, "[o]urs is, as a result, an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders" (Bauman 2000, pp. 7–8). In philosophy, Charles Taylor has spent decades providing a phenomenology of modern selfhood, describing us as "buffered" (Taylor 2007) and "punctual" selves (Taylor 1989); we are self-directed agents, in which our "ultimate purposes are those which arise within [us], the crucial meanings are those defined in [our] responses to them" (Taylor 2007, p. 38). Free for self-construction, we seek authenticity, above all. In each case, the structural conditions of modern life—high differentiation, low trust in institutions, a "punctual" and "buffered" self, social and narrative fragmentation—make us responsible to construct a self, to curate an identity or identities, amid the cultural and narrative fragments we have available: a "do-it-yourself biography", a "risk biography", a "tightrope biography" that could always be otherwise and is "a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 3).

Given "institutionalized individualism" in "liquid modernity", it is not difficult to recognize the headwinds for congregational leaders and also for those seeking a well-integrated spirituality. In seeking to cultivate religious community, congregational leaders create room for individuals working out their own identities, their own lives, their own sense of god. For Beck, this presents an incredible opportunity. Free to live a life of one's own, people might elect for altruism. Free to find a god of one's own, people might finally sever the threads that connect religious enthusiasm and religious violence (Beck 2010). But Beck's hopes do not help the pastor working with individuals compelled by never-ending identity construction. Under the conditions of late modernity, congregations are just one set of cultural materials individuals draw upon to weave a coherent identity or to live a meaningful life. And, as Nancy Ammerman found in her study of everyday American spirituality, many spiritual seekers not rooted in faith communities struggle to find integrity

between their spiritual desires and actual spiritual practice. In short, those who belong to congregations are able to express their spirituality in more consistent ways, but the nature of institutionalized individualism makes such joining difficult, if not culturally odd, and so congregations and everyday Americans have a hard time finding one another (Ammerman 2014, pp. 288–93). These are not necessarily conditions religious leaders can change but rather the situation in which they must work, where they can learn to cultivate space for identity-building while also offering an invitation to membership and participation. As a theory for how we make a meaningful world and live in it at the same time, sensemaking offers one vantage point from which we might pay better attention to the fluid individualizing dynamics of contemporary life and the strategies pastors are employing in their work to offer spiritual resources and create communities of belonging.

3. Sensemaking and the Religious Leader

A group of Hungarian soldiers were lost in the mountains after a training mission went awry. After several days of snow and inclement weather, they began to lose hope until one soldier discovered a map in his gear. The team sprang to action, gathered around the map, and began to make their way back to the base. It was not until they were safe and warm that they noticed that they had the wrong map all along. It was a map of the Pyrenees. They were lost in the Alps. In the end, it mattered less that they had the right map and more that the map gave them a sense of purpose and hope. For the organizational theorist Karl Weick, the lost soldiers illustrate the nature of sensemaking. The accuracy of the map mattered less than the fact that it gave them a frame—a sense of order and an orderly world—from which they could evaluate and track their movement through the mountains (Weick 1995, pp. 54–55). The map, the attentiveness to environmental cues, and the retrospective narration of their steps all came together in a way that allowed the soldiers to take meaningful action while also paying attention to what their action created: use the map to take steps in a direction, and then pay attention to where those steps lead one, and then use the map to take new steps forward and to pay attention once again to where those steps lead. This, for Weick, is the process of sensemaking, which has seven properties: it is (1) Grounded in identity construction; (2) Retrospective; (3) Enactive of Sensible Environments; (4) Social; (5) Ongoing; (6) Focused on and by Extracted Cues; and (7) Driven by Plausibility rather than Certainty (17). Weick describes sensemaking in the following way:

> Once people begin to act (enactment) they generate tangible outcomes (cues) in some context (social), and this helps them to discover (retrospect) what is occurring (ongoing), what needs to be explained (plausibility), and what should be done next (identity enhancement). (Weick 1995, pp. 54–55)

These seven properties offer a way to theorize how people move through the world and how we organize ourselves. Our actions in the world invite a response, which we then seek to understand in light of the story we tell ourselves about who we are, where we are going, and what should be done next.

At the simplest level, sensemaking is about finding a *plausible relation* between a present experience (a "cue") and one's picture of the world (a "frame"). At times, this involves adopting a new picture of the world. At other times, it involves finding a new way to fit one's experience into a current understanding of the world and one's place in it (Weick 1995, pp. 43–49). Either way, sensemaking is an ongoing process which both *creates* and *responds* to a world by finding a relation between cue and frame. For Weick, cues provide the occasion for sensemaking. They are often surprises or interruptions to the normal flow of life, which "ensnare" present experience and become the prompt or seed from which new meaning-making might take place (Weick 1995, p. 111). As meaning-making

organisms, we respond to a surprise or interruption by looking for a way to relate the cue to a "frame", or the larger story we tell about ourselves or our world (Weick 1995, p. 110). In the story of the lost Hungarian soldiers, changes in topography provided cues. The map provided a frame. They made sense of their situation and moved effectively through the world by finding a plausible relationship between cue and frame.

Searching for a plausible relationship between cue and frame within the constant flow of life and experience, successful and plausible sensemaking often does one of two things. It either (1) "preserves flow and continuity" by wrapping the cue into an existing frame or (2) it enacts boundaries in the world to create discontinuity (Weick 1995, p. 108). When sensemaking offers continuity with an existing frame, it works at the level of relation. It finds a way to make a plausible connection—to explain—the connection between one's current experience and the bigger picture within which one is operating. When sensemaking enacts a boundary, it then sets new conditions in the world which persons and communities seek to justify by further sensemaking processes. In this case, sensemaking works at the level of the frame, offering a new picture of things that can accommodate the cue. Whether sensemaking establishes a sense of discontinuity or continuity, we work to make such conclusions plausible within the larger flow of experience. For example, a terse encounter with a neighbor (cue) might lead one to search for evidence that he had a bad day (frame—continuity) and therefore the exchange should not be overanalyzed, leading to a plausible and continuous account of the interaction. Or, this same encounter might lead one to search for evidence that this person is untrustworthy (frame—discontinuity) and so decide to limit interactions with or even act cool or hostile toward the neighbor, thus enacting a new boundary that makes it more likely that relations will become distant, creating the real-world conditions that confirm the new interpretation of the relationship.

For Weick—and, crucially for my concerns in this paper—sensemaking is social in the sense that it is both intersubjective and a function of organizations themselves. Organizations, as collections of people, are created by the sensemaking activities of their participants. And, as social entities that act collectively in a world of actors, organizations are sensemaking organisms. This is true, of course, for religious organizations and religious practice, and pastoral work is situated in the middle of these dynamics (Cormode 2006). In our contemporary environment, congregations are wrestling with a host of disruptive cues—lower participation, underserved committees, rising median age and less engagement from younger members, a polarized social and political context, etc. But those who participate in congregations are also sensemakers, responding to their own disruptive cues while navigating the social terrain of institutionalized individualism. And pastors or religious leaders cultivate the space within which these processes play out, making ad hoc choices about the type of boundaries to cultivate as part of the sensemaking process. And this is where congregational leadership faces an impossible tension. For congregations are not social clubs or neighborhood associations. They are ordered and organized as religious communities, promising to integrate the disparate parts of one's identity into a vocational whole—as persons created and called by God. The nature of a Christian congregation as a church—the gathered and sent "Body of Christ"—pits congregational identity (the congregational frame) against the cultural conditions of institutionalized individualism.

Two extremes pull at the congregational leader. On the one hand, these conditions necessitate the creation of ideological and social boundaries. The invitation to join a community, to connect oneself to the "Body of Christ" through Baptism and Eucharist, to participate in a shared life of spiritual practice and mission, is a very particular kind of frame, a specific way of understanding the world and one's place in it. In cultivating some sort of *intentional community*, pastoral sensemaking offers a particular frame, creates a boundary, and invites individuals to join in the life of the community. This aligns

with Weick's notion of *discontinuous* sensemaking. We might expect this to be a more difficult choice given the conditions of institutionalized individualization. On the other hand, the conditions of late modernity might pressure the congregation to provide a set of resources for individuals as they seek to find purpose and construct an identity. In this case, the congregation can function as a *retreat center* in which pastoral sensemaking helps individuals find a *continuous* relationship between a present challenge in their lives (the cue) and an operative picture of the world (frame). The pastor thus accompanies the individual in their own sensemaking journey, offering them support in their quest for a spiritual integration. In what follows, I explore the nature of such sensemaking work among experienced pastors representative of mainline and evangelical Protestantism in the United States and Canada. Using the sensemaking framework developed here, I explore the nature of such boundary work under the conditions of late modernity to show how pastoral work navigates and works through this tension.

4. Sensemaking in an Age of Individualization

Over the course of two months in early 2025, I interviewed eight experienced pastors and encouraged them to reflect upon their engagement with congregants and their broader community under the conditions of late modernity.[7] The pastors represented diverse theological commitments, geographic locales, and forms of community. Several led more traditional congregations with the full set of expected programs and committees. Others led multi-congregational churches or small, intimate congregations organized around shared meals and practices of hospitality. Developing what John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt call "ideographic" knowledge, this particular project does not seek to develop an empirical account of pastoral practices across the country but rather to describe and understand the ways some pastors approach questions of participation and belonging in their ministries and to place these practices into dialogue with research on individualization and organizational sensemaking (Swinton and Mowat 2006, pp. 43–44). Interviews followed the protocols for narrative inquiry, seeking to understand pastoral experience by way of the stories they told about their own leadership and the participation of their congregants (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Interviews were recorded and coded for sensemaking strategies. In short, the selection of congregational leaders is not meant to be a representative sample of pastors or Protestantism but rather an archaeological exploration of pastoral sensemaking strategies, an attempt to unearth and understand ways in which pastors are navigating this moment through a sensemaking lens. As with a case study method or an ethnography, the interviews generate opportunities for "resonance" and "identification" (Swinton and Mowat 2006, pp. 46–47) or even allegories by which we might understand and redescribe our own experience (Clifford and Marcus 1986, p. 98ff).

Overall, pastoral sensemaking work focused on boundary maintenance, moving between two seemingly incompatible aims—offering the permeability demanded by this age of individualization in some cases and constructing a firm boundary that resists the fluidity of movement demanded by individualization in others. In the first case, pastors made the spiritual resources of their congregation available to individuals in search of spiritual and/or vocational meaning. These individuals are invited to fit the cue which drew them to the congregation into an existing frame—sensemaking provides continuity in one's identity and understanding of the world. Relations of continuity tended to center the congregation around particular values while minimizing the sense of a boundary. These approaches created a porous membrane between congregation and world, giving individuals an opportunity to build their own spiritual identity with the resources granted by the congregation: the retreat center. In the second case, pastors clarify a boundary that defines the community and invite the individual to join. The boundary offers a new

frame to individuals and sensemaking provides discontinuity in one's understanding of oneself and the world. Relations of discontinuity identified and created a boundary between congregation and world, giving individuals an invitation to cross a particular social threshold and join a community: the intentional community. In both cases, sensemaking in the interviews took the form of boundary work, with pastors employing both strategies with some fluidity.

4.1. Continuity with the Frame: The Retreat Center

Sensemaking begins with the cue: an unforeseen interruption, an experience that does not match expectations, a misunderstanding or new insight. In the language of Weick, such experiences become a prompt from which sensemaking begins to look for a relation between the present cue and a frame which can integrate or make sense of the cue. Nearly all the pastors interviewed described this work between cue and frame in terms of continuity, where they sought to make a connection between the present set of cues and an existing frame. Such strategies often did two things at once: (1) they connected the cue to the individual's sense of who they were, (2) by centering and making available a core dimension of the congregation's identity or gifts. This is the form of pastoral sensemaking one might expect in response to individualization.

Rev. H[8] serves a large African American congregation in a major eastern city. Around COVID-19, the congregation merged with another congregation and exercised a great deal of creativity to keep its doors open to the public. Such efforts garnered a reputation as a community church, a church open and available to the neighborhood. In the years since the pandemic, the congregation has built upon these connections, establishing itself as trusted partner in its region of the city for churched and unchurched alike. Public worship casts a wide net, including long-time members, online viewers, and one-time visitors. A trusted neighbor, the congregation hosts several funerals a month for non-members, providing pastoral services for neighbors in need. Rev. H's congregation offers a compelling set of programs organized around core values of the congregation, such as mutual care, hospitality, and service. These programs are made available for members and neighbors, who are encouraged to come as they are and engage in any way that meets their needs. In sensemaking terms, various cues might drive individuals toward the congregation, and the congregation provides resources (pastoral/spiritual care, worship, spiritual practices) to help individuals make a connection between the cue and a larger frame. In these cases, the church functions as a retreat center, providing resources for individuals to connect cues with a frame.

A similar dynamic shapes Rev. R's congregation, a mid-sized majority white church in the Pacific Northwest. Even though Rev. R's congregation is organized as a set of intentional communities with a high boundary for entry, the congregation also seeks to cultivate partnerships with a wide range of neighborhood organizations as part of its missional identity. Responding to perceived needs in the neighborhood, volunteers often find themselves participating in the life of the congregation in important ways—working with a feeding program, serving with a refugee resettlement program—without ever joining the church or one of the intentional communities. Such partners are drawn to the mission of Rev. R's congregation to seek the well-being of the neighborhood but tend to do so on their own terms. They see in the congregation an opportunity to respond to a need in their community (food/housing insecurity, care for refugees, etc.) in a way that bears integrity with their own sense of identity. Again, it is the congregation's clear sense of values and mission to care for the neighborhood that makes it possible for those outside the congregation to come and receive resources to make sense of their own spiritual lives and identity, to connect cue and frame. So also, Rev. W, who serves a mid-sized African

American church in the Northeast, responded to significant turmoil in his congregation by clarifying values around service, and then inviting congregants and newcomers to find a way to serve one another and the broader community.

When offering resources to help individuals connect cue and frame, pastors must balance openness with clarity. They are open to the meaning individuals might make from their interactions with the congregation while also remaining clear about the purpose and nature of the programming or resources that they make available. Rev. A communicates this tension by describing congregational involvement as an elliptical orbit. Because she serves a university population, she often sets up a table at various campus events, communicating the ideals of the congregation along with its celebration of LBGTQ identities. At times, people are drawn close to the community, curious about the life of faith and participating in Bible study or worship or activism. And then something happens and they pull away—for months, sometimes years—before eventually curving back to the community. For Rev. A, the orbit speaks to the histories of "church hurt" experienced by her (mostly) queer congregants. In such a situation, the church provides a consistent presence, and she makes herself available for "non-invasive, non-committal . . . meeting[s]" to accompany participants. Those in orbit are invited to make sense of their lives on their own terms, while Rev. A and her leadership team make clear their values and the ways they can support those seeking a connection to the congregation. Rev. C also describes the balancing act of pastoral sensemaking in an age of individualization. She has cultivated a flat, non-hierarchical approach to congregational life in which individual voices and contributions are valued as part of worship. To create such a space, she needs to be clear about the nature of the community and the importance of listening, hospitality, and sharing space with others. But these central values also require her to share power, to make room for the many stories and perspectives in the community. And so they have an open microphone as part of worship, which can make for "uncomfortable moments", because "when you share power . . . you're letting go of that narrative control". She clarifies a particular center of the congregation so that she might accompany individuals in their own spiritual journeys.

In a congregational setting, sensemaking that allows for continuity between a cue and a frame often concedes control of the process. Various cues compel individuals toward the church—a pandemic, a personal crisis, curiosity, a desire to serve the neighborhood, the surprise of an LGBTQ-affirming congregation, etc. And these individuals bring with them a wide variety of frames for making sense of their lives. Those orbiting Rev. A's congregation might hope to reconcile the cue of a queer-celebrating church with a history of church hurt. Those drawing from Rev. H's neighborhood-focused programming might try to connect the cue of a particular challenge in life with a spiritual heritage or memory of church involvement. Those volunteering with Rev. R's church might try to connect the cue of real needs in the neighborhood with their own sense of being a good person or contributing to the common good. In these situations, pastoral leaders lean into the ambiguity by offering a clear set of values-based programming or resources through which individuals might make their own meaning. Pastors do not offer a frame for interpretation, and thus create a new boundary between congregation and the world, but rather they hold open some central value or practice of the congregation and make it available to individuals. This results in an approach to community building that looks like a retreat center. The congregation opens itself up to others in order to accompany them in their own spiritual journeys: pastoral sensemaking for the age of individualization.

But this was not the only pastoral sensemaking strategy deployed. For each pastor interviewed, sensemaking also moved in the other direction by encouraging individuals to adopt a new frame and to join the congregation in a new way. Here sensemaking creates a boundary and invites a decision—to join or not to join. Such boundaries stand in tension

with the first open-ended form of sensemaking. Where the first helps individuals form a continuous sense of self and world, the second interrupts individualization in favor of a communal interpretation of their journey. In the terms of individualization theory, the first offers pastoral sensemaking to disembedded agents. The second re-embeds the individual in the life of an intentional community.

4.2. Discontinuity with the Frame: The Intentional Community

As developed above, sensemaking finds a relation between a cue and a frame. At times, pastoral sensemaking offers materials for individuals to discern or discover a relationship between a cue and a frame. For example, when an individual who sees herself as the kind of person who cares for the poor and hungry (frame) encounters an unhoused person rummaging through a dumpster behind her building (cue), she might turn toward Rev. C's intentional community for volunteer opportunities in order to stabilize and reinforce her identity. In this case, pastoral leadership offers a ready-made relation between cue and frame for individuals seeking to develop their own spiritual and moral/ethical biographies. In such cases, congregations need to have clear programs, values, and practices that people can join on their own terms. A "center" to which individuals can relate.

In other cases, however, pastoral leaders offered a new frame and invited individuals to place the cue in a new context, to cross a social or ideational boundary and thus enact a new identity in the world. In offering a new frame, pastoral leaders created discontinuity between the individual's self-directed journey, revealing the person within the conditions of institutionalized individualism to be "self-*in*sufficient", as Beck says (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. xxi). That is, the disembedded "life of one's own" requires some level of embeddedness in relationships, communities, and organizations, even if that embeddedness is episodic and mutable (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In a somewhat surprising twist, pastoral leaders reported that the conditions of individualization have created room for deeper and more intentional (but also short-term) commitments to the life of the congregation than earlier in their ministry. In offering a frame, pastoral sensemaking creates discontinuity for individuals by: (1) establishing an adversarial boundary between the congregation and the larger world and/or (2) creating a protective boundary between congregation and world to build a sense of intimacy and intentionality with regard to the practices and life of the church. Such boundaries offer a new frame to individuals and invite them to join a particular community as part of their own spiritual journey.

4.2.1. Taking a Stand: Discontinuity with the World

Several pastors described moments of moral reckoning as formative for their communities. In such cases, the moral claim made by the congregation and/or pastoral leader offered a frame in response to the challenge or issue arising in the city/nation/world (cue). For example, after the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, Rev. A knew that things had changed in her neighborhood and congregation. Situated near a major university and in a neighborhood with a large Jewish population, the broad progressive, center-left consensus fractured, with groups dividing along Palestinian and Israeli lines in the days after the attack and leading up to Israel's military incursion in Gaza. Strong feelings surfaced. Protests broke out on the university campus in support of Palestine while other groups vocalized their solidarity with Israel. And the congregation felt called to do something. Drawing upon its commitment to liberationist LGBTQ theologies, the leadership invited those unsettled by the situation to join them in protesting the war in Gaza. It placed them "on the edge", as Rev. A said, "because there were so many people in [our neighborhood] who were involved in those civic actions. But there were also a lot of people in [the neighborhood] who did not appreciate it at all". The war and the divide in the progressive community

were disruptive cues in the community. Rev. A and her leadership team responded by offering a frame for these cues—connecting the Palestinian plight with God's liberative work—and thus took a particular kind of stand, inviting others to join them. Those that did adopt the frame given by Rev. A's congregation joined a particular community in a public way, marking out a new boundary for the participants and the congregation.

Rev. B's congregation has also taken clear positions in opposition to local public opinion. Located in a major American city, Rev. B's congregation has found itself struggling against the neighborhood association, police, and city council representatives who support aggressive policing and restrictive housing policies that disproportionately impact people of color. In response to conflicts around policing, fair housing, and economic opportunity, Rev. B offers a frame they call the "gospel mandate", which means a holistic concern for the well-being of those harmed by the current system. Such a mandate marks out a boundary and sets up an adversarial approach to those organizations and political actors who promote unjust and unfair practices and policies. This makes Rev. B's congregation strange in the neighborhood, such that joining the congregation means aligning oneself with a particular moral and political orientation. In response to the cues of neighborhood concerns regarding public safety and house prices, the "gospel mandate" provides a frame that invites a decision, inviting one to join the resistance and try on a new identity.

The adversarial approach also shows up in response to political polarization and the nationalization of politics. Two different pastors reflected upon the ways in which national conversations create local pressures in the congregation to act or make a statement. In both cases, they offered a frame that heightened the importance of the concrete, local, and embodied, thus cultivating a boundary between the local and the national, concrete ethical demands and abstract ideologies. Rev. D serves a congregation in a conservative exurb that has avoided making any public statements about their views on gay, lesbian, or transgender issues. While both pastors at the church are LGBTQ-affirming, the elder board and membership is divided on the issue. Amid pressure to take a side, Rev. D has instead reinterpreted these cues in light of the concrete ethical demand to love one's neighbor, seeking to make space for all kinds of people, commenting how some gay and lesbian members "want a community where they can go to church and their conservative dad can come too . . . because they're working this out in their life, and they would like the local church to be a part of that . . . it's really only the political discourse that was pressuring us to be affirming or not. It's not the local community". In a similar turn toward the local and particular, Rev. B reflected upon the first months of the new U.S. presidential administration and the trauma this has caused their progressive, diverse congregation. In one recent sermon, they read from a list of executive orders, many of which attack the gender and sexual and racial identities of those in the congregation, and then turned toward the vocation of the church as the gathered body of Christ, recognizing that presidential declarations have no bearing on the concrete and local reality of the church: "...the executive orders don't define church. In fact, that's the blessing of church . . . nothing that has been declared has anything to do with us. The gospel we declared last week is the same this week . . . while there might be some places that don't comply with the gospel mandate, that is not us. We are compliant. We are compliant with the gospel, but not that national current". In both cases, the disruptive and highly emotional cues of national political news and pressures were redirected by a new frame which heightened the ethical and theological importance of their actual neighbors. The frame recontextualized national polarizing trends by focusing attention on the immediate ethical demand to love one's neighbor, creating a boundary between the prevalent social imaginary and the concrete life of the community.

4.2.2. Cultivating Intimacy: Discontinuity from the World

In pastoral sensemaking, frames are not only used to take a stand against some prevailing social issue or pressure. They are also utilized to create a safe space within the ebb and flow of everyday life for community intimacy and spiritual formation. Rev. G pastors a large majority white mainline congregation on the West Coast with a well-connected and active social justice ministry. Rev. G notes that, in a context where fewer people attend church, church attendance and participation take on an unexpected intensity because people do not show up to church by accident or under social pressure. Rev. G has seen this in an annual men's gathering and an adult formation group. In recent years, both ministries have increased in intensity and intentionality, asking participants to commit to shared spiritual practices and rhythms of prayer and study. Such changes, Rev. G says, have been driven by participants who see in shared, intentional, rhythms of study and prayer "companionship in the life of faith". The temptation, Rev. G admits, is to "lower the bar a little bit" given the challenges congregations face in post-Christendom contexts, but many of the cues that drive individuals to go to church—a spiritual crisis, curiosity, loneliness, a spiritual awakening—demand a new frame within which to fit and make sense of their experiences. Drawing from Christian spirituality, Rev. G has begun to frame these cues within a larger vision of intentional and shared spiritual practices. To Rev. G's surprise, discipleship groups have formed within the congregation, with more and more individuals choosing to commit themselves to specific practices for a period of relational intensity and spiritual intentionality.

A similar theme plays out with Rev. D and Rev. R, both of whom organize their congregational membership around shared spiritual practices rather than the usual classes, committees, and programs of congregational life. Both pastors offer congregants and newcomers a specific frame for the nature of congregational life. They present the congregation as an intentional community of practice and invite persons to order their lives by these practices with the community. Such a frame for congregational life invites individuals to make a choice and recontextualize one's life within the vision of the congregational community. The frame offers a boundary, which invites the individual to enact a new identity in the world as part of a particular community. In the case of Rev. D, this boundary work is relatively new, an experiment. For Rev. R, such intentional communities of practice have always been part of the congregation but now require greater effort to maintain in an environment where religious participation is more episodic. As Rev. R says, "religious people find us difficult because the ask or the bar of discipleship . . . is high".

Framing is also used to amplify the peculiarity and particularity of a community's social relationships. A frame that centers the openness and intimacy of a community, for example, creates a protective boundary around the community. To belong means to choose to enter an intimate space and to be open to the gifts and challenges of those in that space. Rev. C serves a small congregation in the restorationist tradition in the Bible Belt. Surrounded by large, program-driven mega-churches, Rev. C's community has focused on the practice of hospitality, ordering congregational life around making space for one another. Formed by the broader church culture, she notes how easy it is for the "production values" modeled by influential churches in her region to shape the expectations and practices of her own church. "My concern is that a lot of churches, even small churches, are losing intimacy because they are trying to be like big churches . . . but we are really trying to hold onto cultivating intimacy, healthy intimacy. That includes, you know, good listening and informed consent". In order to cultivate such space, she must offer a frame for the nature of the church free from the "production values" of program-driven congregations, thus creating a boundary, a marker that identifies how *this* space is different and how it asks something different from congregants. It is a boundary that asks one to join and participate

in a dance of hospitality, rather than consume a church service. The individual is again given an opportunity to choose to join themselves and their journey to a community.

When pastoral leaders offer a new frame to individuals and congregants, they create a boundary around the community. The bounded community becomes a frame by which individuals might make sense of the cues which have arisen in their context or congregation. To adopt the frame is to identify with some element of the congregation and to enact a new social reality. That is to say, the integration of identity and purpose on offer is not pre-packaged or available in single servings. It is the function of a larger community of practice and involves crossing a boundary and making a commitment. According to Weick, the reality of this new commitment will create its own sensemaking momentum, as individuals seek to create a plausible and continuous identity within the new social and ideational reality (Weick 1995, p. 108).

5. Conclusions: Sensemaking and Polarities

In the 1980s, the missiologist Paul Hiebert brought the sociological distinction between "centered set" and "bounded set" communities into mission studies and church leadership literature (Hiebert 1983; Yoder et al. 2009). The basic idea is that people either organize in relationship to a shared boundary or are drawn together by a compelling center.[9] Micahel Frost and Alan Hirsch illustrate this with a colorful metaphor drawn from cattle ranches in the Australian outback. Unlike ranches across the American Midwest, with miles of electric fences to keep cattle near the barn, Australian ranchers simply dig a well (Frost and Hirsch 2003). In an arid climate, the water source ensures that cattle will not stray too far, diminishing the need for fencing. The well, in this case, offers a compelling and vital center, which keeps the "set"—in this case, cattle—together. By contrast, a bounded set is a community held together by maintaining clear boundaries between insider and outsider. A study of Amway by Michael Pratt describes the bounded-set community as the ideological maintenance of a fortress, where sensemaking seeks to tie individual experiences back into the frames offered by organization (Pratt 2000).

Under the conditions of late modernity, we see what appears to be two mutually exclusive sensemaking strategies. In some cases, pastors responded to high levels of social differentiation to make the congregation a retreat center for individuals seeking meaning and purpose. In other cases, pastors articulated the boundaries of a community, defining the *charism* of the congregation and inviting individuals to join and participate. Different ecclesiological approaches might suggest that pastors need to choose one strategy over another. Is the Church a counter-culture, a theo-ethical "community of character" in the spirit of the Anabaptist tradition (Hauerwas 1981)? Such theological commitments would seem to inform the "intentional community" sensemaking strategies and understand the church in bounded-set terms. Pastors offer a clear frame for the spiritual life and invite people to join and participate. Or, is the Church a means of grace, a community of Word and Sacrament and a place in which and through which people might connect with the divine[10] (Dulles 2002, pp. 55–68)? Such an approach suggests something like a retreat center, where people come and go as they navigate their journey with God: a centered set.

Pastoral practice, however, revealed fluidity across and between ecclesial traditions—mainline, evangelical, non-denominational, Anabaptist. Pastoral stories of participation and belonging established neither a centered-set nor bounded-set community but rather leveraged the gifts of both types, operating as a retreat center in some cases and an intentional community in others. Like positive and negative poles of a magnet, we see pastoral leaders managing a polarity rather than pursuing a consistent strategy of centered/bounded or retreat center/intentional community. On the one hand, the intentional community offers a clear sense of identity, a narrative structure, and a shared rhythm of

life. It creates a strong center from which a congregation might come to understand its vocation and gifts. But its boundaries must be managed by offering a particular frame for meaning-making and by making a peculiar claim on its congregants. On the other hand, the retreat center makes very few demands on individuals, giving them space to make spiritual sense of their own lives and resources by which to do it. It makes it possible for the congregation to open its life to the greater community but falls short of creating a moral or formational community, a place in which the disembedded agents of modernity might re-embed their lives. Here we have a polarity rather than a dichotomy. Polarities name tensions in an organization that are necessary for its vitality, even though they seem at odds with each other. A vital organization manages a polarity by amplifying the strengths of each pole rather than letting the two cancel each other out[11] (Johnson 1992). In managing this polarity, pastoral sensemakers might offer a clue as to the terms of belonging and meaning-making in late modernity.

Ulrich Beck claims that individualization results from the ways we are disembedded from the communities, narratives, and institutions which once integrated our lives into meaningful wholes. We do not cut ourselves free from these institutions but are set adrift by the structures of late modernity. We experience this as freedom and compulsion. We are free to choose our own life, and yet we also have no other choice. Because this is a structural reality, our independence is also a type of dependence. Cut loose from communities and dis-integrated, we realize our need for others, a need to be re-embedded in communities and institutions that can grant us meaning and identity. Individualization reveals our self-*in*sufficiency, he says. Moving between continuous and discontinuous sensemaking strategies, pastors can and do respond to these sociological realities by creating boundaries that invite individuals to make choices, to join, to give themselves to something, even if it is just for a short time. And in eliminating boundaries and holding open a vital center of spiritual resources for individuals to utilize, pastors make it possible for people to make a life (and perhaps god) of their own. That is to say: late modernity requires intentional communities with a well-formed identity and clear thresholds for belonging and participation, but it also requires communities with clear values and practices on offer for self-directed identity construction. It requires intentional communities for reintegrating our lives and retreat centers for building our own lives. By managing this polarity, pastoral leaders show how congregations might engage this age of individualization.[12] For the boundary and center just might offer integrity to one another, a creative tension that not only addresses the waves of identity work of late modernity but also keeps the congregation vital: a polarity whose tension is generative and energizing, lived wisdom that might invite us to rethink and adapt our congregational structures for this new era.

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Notes

1 The challenge for congregations is not only that fewer people go to church or support church budgets but that rates of participation follow that of other voluntary organizations, with younger generations engaging in church activities with less frequency than older generations. See (Pew Research Center 2019).

2 Beck calls this a "you're on your own" kind of life, in which we are free to live "a life of one's own" and also to find "a god of one's own". See (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, pp. 22–29; Beck 2010).

3 Several theorists of modernity distinguish between "first" and "second" modernity or "late" modernity. Late modernity is characterized by the intensification of modern processes of differentiation and instrumentalization, leading toward the dissolution of the very things modernity sought to create. Ulrich Beck's notion of a "World Risk Society" marks late modernity as reflexive in nature. Modernity creates the very risks we now seek to manage, such as the climate crisis or the financial collapse in 2008. See (Rasborg 2021).

4 Reflexive rather than reflective notes how we are compelled to "make do" in the course of life without any other space from which to consider or reflect upon our lives or identity. As Beck says, "One of the decisive features of the indivdualization processes, then, is that they not only permit but they demand an active contribution from individuals . . . Individualization is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it and to do this amid changing preferences and successive stages of life. . ." (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 4).

5 The term "institutionalized individualism" is from the work of Talcott Parsons, which Beck picks up and redefines in a non-linear manner. See (Parsons 1978, p. 321). See also (Beck 1992).

6 Beck distinguishes between the individualism promised by neoliberalism and the actual institutional contours of modern life. Neoliberalsim promises self-sufficiency, an "autarkic self" in which "individuals alone can master the whole of their lives, that they drive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves". But the relational complexities of modern life reveal the exact reverse. The more individualization takes hold, the more we need the institutions which have disembedded us. See (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. xxi).

7 While not meant to be a representative sample, pastors were selected to offer a broad range of contexts and social locations. Of the eight pastors, four are from free-church traditions and four are in mainline traditions, two African American and six white, five men, two women, and one non-binary. In terms of geography, two were in the Northwest, three in the Northeast, two in the Midwest, and one in the South.

8 As part of the informed consent agreement, I have protected the anonymity of the pastors interviewed and their congregations.

9 Hiebert points toward the existence of "fuzzy" sets as well, which are more common in cultures less prone to dualistic thinking than in the West. Hiebert and other missiologists applied set theory to understand the different ways in which conversion and belonging in the church are understood across cultures. My purpose in bringing it up here is only to illustrate the tensions in pastoral sensemaking around community boundaries. See (Hiebert 1983).

10 Of course, there are many different approaches to ecclesiology. These two examples are not meant to represent a binary or even necessarily oppositional, but rather as two different points of emphasis which might express themselves in pastoral ministry in different ways.

11 By now, polarity management is common in congregational leadership circles. The basic idea is that some tensions in organizations require leaders to strengthen each "pole" simultaneously, creating a sense of creativity and dynamism that would not be there if the tension was muted or one side chosen over the other, such as tradition and innovation, or, as I am suggesting here, the intentional community and retreat center. See (Oswald and Johnson 2010).

12 As Beck says, the solution to individualization is not to arrest the development of individualization but rather in forging a new sociality rooted in reciprocal relations (18–19). This kind of reciprocity is, perhaps, what pastoral sensemaking opens up (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

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Article

Exploring Theologies of Money: Religious Leaders' Use of Stewardship, Its Strengths, and Limitations

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Abstract: Questions of finance and economic models are vital for congregational leaders to consider, but they are too often overlooked in research and practice. While we argue that the explicit attention to budgets and balance sheets should be a focus of both congregational researchers and religious leaders, we would also argue that these topics are embedded in congregational life as practices and cultures of giving that are likewise rooted in theologies of money. To examine the theologies of money religious leaders rely on in shaping their views of receiving, managing, and spending resources, our study analyzes the qualitative data of 82 clergy interviews from the National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices (NSCEP). We find that the language of "stewardship" continues to dominate, and we consider how this language has both shaped and masked congregations' current and future engagement with money matters.

Keywords: theology of money; steward; stewardship; congregation; economic practices; economic models; generosity; tithe; offering

1. Introduction

Questions of finance and economic models are vital for congregational leaders to consider, but they are too often overlooked in research and practice (Mundey et al. 2019). A lack of attention may partially be attributable to a lack of data, but it may also be the case that both scholars and practitioners demonstrate a lack of interest, high anxiety, or a general distaste for exploring financial issues in religious contexts. While we argue that the explicit attention to budgets, balance sheets, and endowments should be a focus of both congregational researchers and religious leaders, we would also argue that these topics are not only simply questions of dollars and cents. Embedded in congregational life are practices and cultures of giving that are likewise rooted in theologies of money. When exploring questions of congregations' financial resources, we would do well to attend to the theologies, moral frameworks, and practices that consciously or unconsciously shape the ways in which we address or ignore the intersection of faith and money.

To address the lack of data on congregational finances, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy conducted the National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices (NSCEP), a nationally representative sample of congregations (Fulton and King 2018). The survey focused on how congregations receive, manage, and spend financial resources. In addition, researchers conducted 94 qualitative interviews with clergy to further explore the theological frames, practices, logics, and cultures of giving that shape their congregations' economic practices.

Through those interviews, the dominant frame was clear. When Christian clergy talk about money, giving, or finances in the church, they employ the language of stewardship. In this article, we unpack the contexts from which this frame emerged, what it included, and how it has both shaped and masked congregations' engagement with money matters. We also introduce critiques, counter-narratives, and alternative approaches to stewardship when they arise in the interviews. In conclusion, we discuss the ways in which stewardship often serves both as an amorphous catch-all concept as well as a rigid and calcified theological frame, even as clergy employ the term pervasively to describe all the work being carried out to attend to the practical ways in which congregations receive, manage, and spend money.

2. Literature Review

While attention to congregational finances and a particular theological concept such as stewardship is often underdeveloped in the academic literature, a focus on these topics has come from several angles. The dominance of stewardship in the American church has a history, and so does the development and debate over its meaning and its regular use as a core frame for the economic practices of congregations, particularly through theological, ethical, and sociological lenses.

2.1. Stewardship's History

Across Christian history, the language of stewardship and its dominance as a frame for church finances is not new, but it is not as old as we often might think. In particular, the disestablishment of religious communities in the United States fostered a new focus on congregational finances. Across the nineteenth century, the growth of religious communities grew from the formerly established traditions of Puritans and Anglicans to democratized traditions of Methodists and Baptists (Hatch 1991). Following a growth toward populism and the rise in voluntary associations, congregations' economic models shifted from obligatory church taxes to free-will giving that became a particular American and Protestant construct. Even if pew rentals remained the most consistent form of revenue through much of the nineteenth century, with the rapid growth and institutionalization of denominational structures, missionary societies, and other voluntary associations, religious leaders also began to prioritize a return to asking for voluntary financial support, and the language of stewardship soon gained prominence (Hudnut-Beumler 2007; Lynn and Wisely 2012).

Models of stewardship among Christian and largely Protestant congregations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century grew out of a voluntary versus established church structure, but they also embraced a regular and programmatic approach to giving that foregrounded the essential nature of the church in society not as the recipient and disburser of optional and individualized Christian charity but rather a central institution to be supported as an obligation of Christian duty. In that vein, new stewardship language turned to embrace a biblical mandate for the tithe. Religious leaders, both clergy and denominational officials, began to focus on prescribing proportionate giving of a particular percentage of income, regular rituals, and stewardship programs. Manuals, exemplar sermons, and standardized programs on stewardship were shared through institutional structures that prioritized an active Christianity keen to promote the need for Chrisitan giving in order to support an active Christianity beyond piety but also for a transformed culture (Hudnut-Beumler 2007, pp. 66–67).

Programmatically, a consistent language of stewardship was taking root in the Protestant vernacular in the first half of the twentieth century. Theologically, however, this emerging stewardship language embraced a tripartite framework. First, there was a focus

on the call to voluntary giving even as religious leaders advocated a return to a prescribed amount, an obligated tithe. Second, they began to embrace a perspective that while God was the "owner," Christians on this earth modeled possession and responsibility for stewarding resources. Third, for some, a nascent prosperity angle was latent in their stewardship theology. If one was to be blessed by God, then one owed God their fair share (Hudnut-Beumler 2007, p. 72).

Even as stewardship emerged as the primary language and technique around congregational finances and giving by the early twentieth century, critics emerged as well. Northern Methodist John M. Versteeg worried that "the meaning of stewardship had been stretched beyond recognition" (Hudnut-Beumler 2007, p. 99). Versteeg argued that stewardship was a nebulous word that "could lend itself to any enterprise" but had been coopted for a particular focus on money. Instead, he encouraged a response that included service of time, talents, and anything besides the technique of pastors encouraging a "tithe" (Versteeg 1923, pp. 13–14). Less than a decade later, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, in his regular piece in the periodical *Christian Century*, questioned whether stewardship was ethical. In the context of the Gilded Age's concentrated wealth and new philanthropic capital, Niebuhr was skeptical that conventional stewardship language could speak to current moral complexities. He called out the church as too easily satisfied—too quick to praise the virtue of the philanthropic gifts made by those with concentrated wealth and power. Niebuhr claimed that "the apparently voluntary nature of a gift does not necessarily make it a truly ethical act" (Niebuhr 1930). He admitted that Protestant teachings on giving are full of mixed motives, but he challenged the Protestant churches to see stewardship as an ethical issue—personal, communal, global (King 2018).

Ultimately, the critiques of those like Versteeg and Niebuhr served as minority voices. The Protestant church continued to utilize stewardship in a more traditional language focused on fundraising and giving. In modes of expansion post-World War II, denominations and their congregations most often continued to foreground technique over theology. Stewardship became more focused on the popular parlance of pledge drives and annual fundraising campaigns. The results across the 20th century proved generally successful as stewardship language became pervasive. Books, programs, and conferences on stewardship emerged. The World Council of Churches convened a Commission on Stewardship. Even the Roman Catholic church by the late twentieth century embraced the language of stewardship as essential to the work of parish finances. In 1992, the U.S. Catholic Bishops published a pastoral letter: *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* and later a resource manual on *Stewardship and Development in Catholic Dioceses and Parishes* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002). While the frame of stewardship would continue to mean many things to many people, it had been become pervasive as the practical container for the ways in which congregations and their leaders sought to raise revenues and manage budgets, as well as connect faith with finances.

2.2. Criticizing the Dominant Stewardship Frame

While the stewardship frame came to dominate congregational finances, a new generation of ethicists and theologians advanced the critiques initially levied by Versteeg and Niebuhr. Douglas John Hall, member of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Stewardship and preeminent 20th century theologian of stewardship, sought to dismantle the predominant conceptualization. In his estimation, "The term stewardship has a decidedly distasteful connation. It at once conjures up the horrors of every-person visitations, building projects, financial campaigns, and the seemingly incessant harping of the churches for more money. Ministers cringe at the mention of Stewardship Sundays: must they really lower themselves to the status of fundraiser once more?" (Hall 1982). Hall then sought

to reclaim stewardship as a deeply biblical symbol that embraced a holistic approach to stewardship in all of life.

Just a few years later, Christian social ethicist Max Stackhouse similarly pointed to the underwhelming temptation to see stewardship as nothing more the menial task of raising the budget: "In our reactions against seeing stewardship only as fund-raising, we must not be tempted to ignore the reality of economics and money." In his analysis, stewardship theology had evolved since the early twentieth century to now focus directly "on individuals and individual piety, putting all the responsibility on the self and leaving the structure of both church and public order out of the picture" (Stackhouse 1985). As stewardship frames came to dominate the programmatic nature of congregational finances, Stackhouse fretted that they served as fundraising affirmations over a rich theological framework.

Critical theological and ethical approaches to stewardship have continued. In recent years, critiques have focused on updating the approach to stewardship "beyond the offering plate" (Copeland 2017), addressing equity and environmentalism (Johnson 2023), wealth and poverty (Escobar 2022), as well as racial justice (Foley 2025), politics (Williams et al. 2024), and disaster relief (Gazley et al. 2022). As scholars have also begun to reengage even larger topics such as money (Goodchild 2009; Singh 2018), markets (Hirschfeld 2018), capitalism (Tanner 2019), debt (Ahn 2017), work (Lynn 2023), and social enterprise (Sampson 2022), religious leaders may be experiencing a disconnect between the continual embrace of stewardship language in practice and the theoretical frames that are interrogating larger economic concepts.

2.3. Stewardship in Historical and Biblical Theology

In recent decades, there has also been a renewed interest in the economic practices of the early Church. Historical work that has focused on patristic theology in both the Greco-Roman West (Brown 2012, 2015) as well as the Eastern Byzantine Empire (Caner 2021) has demonstrated how understandings of wealth, poverty, charity, and giving were significantly shaped by the nature of early Christianity and the cultures in which it emerged (Downs 2008, 2016; Rhee 2012; Anderson 2013; Gonzalez 2002). In recovering these ancient contexts, scholars have often demonstrated how earlier understanding was often quite different and distinct from the theologies and practice of stewardship that have come to dominate across the twentieth and twenty-first century American church.

Similarly, scholars of biblical studies have also returned to broader questions of money and possessions across Scripture. While the work of these scholars is naturally intertwined with the historical theology outlined above, they are also keen to explore the biblical narrative for the breadth of language used to attend to the practices of giving and receiving, wealth and poverty, and the right use of possessions in community. Scholars like Mark Allen Powell (2006) and Craig Blomberg (2000, 2013) offer comprehensive and approachable overviews of how giving and possessions have been approached across Scripture. Perhaps most illustrative of this approach is Walter Brueggemann, whose biblical scholarship on money and possessions has sought not only to offer a comprehensive overview but also to introduce new language of abundance over scarcity and a shift toward generosity and gift while away from the dominance of stewardship (Brueggemann 1999, 2016). As these commentaries and popular books have filtered into clergy's studies, they have offered additional language to pastors focusing on the texts for their stewardship sermons or the larger narrative arc of Scripture addressing questions of money and possessions.

2.4. Sociological and Congregational Studies

Focusing on both individuals and institutions, disciplines such as sociology have also shaped this conversation on faith and giving. From large national studies such as the Faith

Matters Survey (Putnam and Campbell 2010) or the Economic Values Survey (Wuthnow 1994), we know not only what, how, and where Americans give, but we also have insights into the motivations of religious giving as well as individuals' orientations toward money. In *Passing the Plate*, Chrisitan Smith builds upon this work to not only collect denominations' teaching on financial giving but also to attend to both the practices and perspectives of laity and clergy in considering their giving to the church (Smith et al. 2008). Merging a focus on individual motivations with institutional structures, collaborations such as *Financing American Religion* (Chaves and Miller 1999) demonstrate how money and economic models have shaped particular types of religious institutions while Vaidyanathan and Snell (2011) attend to the types of financial appeals that shape congregations' approaches to giving.

Religious giving, and stewardship in particular, are also discussed in congregational studies. While waves of the National Congregations Study, Faith and Communities Today (FACT), and particular studies within the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) initiative cover financial matters, they are largely focused on gathering comprehensive data. Yet, several recent FACT and EPIC studies, recognizing the heightened interest in financial matters in congregations in recent years, have highlighted economic and giving practices in congregations (Payne et al. 2022; EPIC 2024). The most in-depth study on individual Americans' giving to congregations and the factors that influence giving across Christian traditions was conducted by Dean Hoge and colleagues in the early 1990s. While perhaps a bit dated three decades after its publication, *Money Matters: Personal Giving in American Churches* and other publications resulting from the original study continue to serve as an essential foundation for how stewardship and other language around money in the church has shaped congregational giving practices (Hoge et al. 1996, 1998).

2.5. Practice and Application

In threading together the multiple studies that have shaped congregations' language on financial giving, one last influential area is a genre of media (books, podcasts, manuals, blogs, etc.) designed to support and shape the work of religious leaders. These media were the same type of resources that established stewardship as the dominant frame in the early twentieth century as collections of sermons, denominational tracts, and Sunday school manuals set stewardship programs in motion. This literature continues to be diverse, and as it continues to reach a broad audience today, there are various approaches. In only focusing on a smattering of written texts here, one major approach mixes theological grounding with a how-to guide on church finance, religious leadership, and "stewardship ministry" (Hotchkiss 2002; Lane 2006; Jamieson and Jamieson 2009; Smith 2015; Weems and Michel 2021; Lee et al. 2025).

A variation on these how-to texts are others that mix personal stories and case studies with a call for revising or expanding traditional stewardship language. United Methodist pastor Michael Mather calls for "finding abundant communities in unexpected places" (Mather 2018); Roman Catholic fundraiser and nonprofit CEO Kerry Robinson focuses on *Imagining Abundance* (Robinson 2014); and Presbyterian pastor Karl Travis calls us to focus on *God's Gift of Generosity: Gratitude Beyond Stewardship* (Travis 2024).

Finally, another approach in this genre of practical application seeks to address the limitations of traditional stewardship approaches in a shifting landscape for congregations as religious affiliation and participation decline, needs for buildings and space change, and economic models evolve. Texts such as Mark Deymaz's *The Coming Revolution in Church Economics: Why Tithes and Offerings are No Longer Enough and What You Can Do About It* (Deymaz and Li 2019) or Mark Elsdon's *We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry* (Elsdon 2021) suggest new approaches.

2.6. Language of Stewardship

As shown across this review of the literature, the history and current use of the term 'stewardship' is unusually significant: it is a modern theological term that has influenced a variety of discourses and conversations. This article then returns to focus on exploring how Christian pastors define and use stewardship language in the context of the economic practices of their congregations.

The sheer variety of the term's uses suggests that stewardship has wandered from its original meaning and has the characteristics of what Catholic priest and philosopher Ivan Illich calls an 'amoeba word' (2002). For Illich, this framing refers to a word that has lost any precision and, resembling a stone thrown into a pond, makes waves but does not hit anything. These words are not the same as hackneyed phrases or cliches, but precisely because the word can be used to cover so much ground, it runs the risk of becoming an empty, vague term. If stewardship could mean anything related to 'responsibility' or 'care' or 'giving,' then what does it mean? On the other hand, if in practice it has come to mean the programming related to the giving and managing of money in the church, perhaps it has become overly narrow, calcified, and rigid rather than flexible and broad. Listening to clergy themselves may help us to know how stewardship is understood and utilized in congregational life today.

3. Data and Methods

To examine congregational leaders' theologies of money and the way it shapes their communication and practice around finances, our study analyzes data from the NSCEP (Fulton and King 2018). This nationally representative study of religious congregations began with a survey of key informants in congregations (Fulton et al. 2022). Key informants, typically congregational leaders, completed an online survey of questions about their congregation's characteristics, activities, and economic practices. Respondents from 1227 congregations completed the survey with a response rate of 40%. Subsequently, NSCEP interviewed 94 of the key informants from a cross-section of congregations based on congregational size, congregational age, the tenure of the leader, religious tradition, the racial background of the congregation, region, and community setting (rural, suburban, or urban). Table 1 shows that interviewees came from 14 Catholic, 29 evangelical Protestant, 32 mainline Protestant, 7 Black Protestant, 3 Jewish, and 9 "other" religious congregations. Among Protestant religious traditions, interviewees represent 28 different denominations. Religious traditions represented among our interviewees from the RELTRAD category of "other" include Buddhist, Muslim, Orthodox, Sikh, and Unitarian Universalist (UU) (Steensland et al. 2000). In addition, interviewees hail from 20 states and all regions of the United States. Finally, Table 1 shows that the sample of interviewees spans a wide range in the congregational metrics of size and revenue.

A team of NSCEP researchers audio-recorded and transcribed each of the 94 key informant interviews. Within the semi-structured interviews, clergy answered specific questions about how they approached the concept of money as well as the cultures of giving in their congregation. While the authors of this paper examined the transcripts along both inductive and deductive lines, the codes or themes herein are primarily the product of inductive analysis. The crucial step in the inductive analysis of qualitative interviews is the careful reading of raw interview transcripts until evaluators have a detailed understanding of the themes and ideas articulated by the interviewees (Thomas 2006). Therefore, we read 80 of the 94 interview transcripts (or 85%) before finalizing the codebook. This method increases our confidence that the findings described below are faithful to the voice of the U.S. religious leaders interviewed. Note, in our analysis for this paper with the particular

focus on Christian congregations, we narrowed our focus to include only the Christian interviewees for a total of 82 interviews.

Table 1. Clergy interviewees.

Interviewees	Black Prot.	Catholic	Evangelical	Jewish	Mainline	Other
Total (94)	7	14	29	3	32	9
Region:						
Midwest (30)	2	6	12	0	7	3
Northeast (18)	1	5	4	1	6	1
Southeast (28)	4	0	9	2	10	3
West (18)	0	3	4	0	9	2
Gender of Clergy:						
Female (18)	1	1	3	0	12	1
Male (76)	6	13	26	3	20	8
Congregation Size:						
N/A (8)	0	0	4	1	1	2
1–49 (7)	3	0	0	0	4	0
50–99 (4)	1	0	2	0	1	0
100–249 (19)	1	1	8	1	5	3
250–999 (42)	2	8	11	1	17	3
1000+ (14)	0	5	4	0	4	1
Annual Revenue:						
N/A (9)	0	0	5	1	1	2
$0–$99,000 (6)	3	0	2	0	1	0
$100 K–$249 K (8)	2	0	1	0	5	0
$250 K–$499 K (22)	1	4	6	1	5	5
$500 K–$999 K (16)	1	4	3	0	8	0
$1,000,000+ (33)	0	6	12	1	12	2

4. Findings

4.1. Stewardship Language as the Dominant Framework

There are deep divisions throughout the Christian church, both between traditions and within denominations, related to a variety of issues such as differing views on gender, sexuality, and political affiliation. While these differences may mostly appear through contemporary social and political discourse, they are often based in different and competing theological frameworks and commitments. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that there are still shared, ecumenical theological concepts that persist despite these differences. Ask a Christian pastor how they speak to their congregation about money and resources, and you will likely come across the word 'stewardship'.

Among the 82 NSCEP interviews we examined, without a direct prompt, 80% of Christian pastors used the word 'stewardship' or 'steward' when talking about their congregations' economic practices, particularly when reflecting on their theology of money[1]. While stewardship language appears to be broadly ecumenical, there was a hierarchy of usage across different denominations. Within the mainline Protestant tradition, the use of stewardship language was ubiquitous, with 94% of interviewees adopting the terminology. This language is also used by the majority of evangelical and Black Protestant pastors. Three-quarters of both evangelical pastors (75%) and Black Protestant pastors (78%) used stewardship language. In contrast, just over half of Catholic interviewees (57%) used stewardship terminology.

The frequency of using stewardship language also varied among interviewees. While noting that interviewees were not asked about stewardship directly, 36 of the interviewees

used this terminology minimally (less than 10 times). Sixteen of the interviewees used this language moderately (10–19 times), and nine interviewees used the words 'steward' and 'stewardship' extensively (20 or more times). In terms of the most frequent instances of use, one mainline pastor used these two terms 57 times during the interview.

There were variances between traditions on the frequency of the use of stewardship language. Of those that used stewardship language, 76% of conservative Protestants/evangelicals and 83% of Black Protestant pastors used this terminology minimally throughout the interview. In contrast, 42% of mainline pastors used stewardship language minimally, with 35% using it a moderate amount and 23% an extensive amount. For Catholic clergy, of those that used stewardship language, half used it minimally and half used it moderately.

While religious leaders exhibit variation in usage, stewardship language is a familiar, and in some instances, dominant framework for thinking and talking about money among religious leaders across different Christian traditions.

4.2. What Does Stewardship Mean? Stewardship as a Noun

Among interviewees, there was widespread agreement on the core theological claim inherent in the concept of stewardship. Clergy articulated stewardship as primarily a theological claim about ownership. In fact, among the 1227 respondents to the initial NSCEP survey, 86% of congregational leaders agreed that money and possessions ultimately belong to God, not individuals (King et al. 2019). Clergy taught that God is the owner of all resources, and people are responsible to steward those resources appropriately. Using the terms invoked by interviewees, religious leaders noted that in response to God, Christians are called to be stewards or managers of their resources.

During the interviews, one of the most common places where stewardship was invoked was when religious leaders were asked about their theology of money. A male evangelical pastor offered a succinct summary of a common response interviewees offered: "We teach that God owns it all so that we are stewards of what he gives us and it's not ours, it belongs to him." Another pastor, from a mainline denomination, takes this conception slightly further, and introduces 'manage' as a synonym for steward: "It's everything. It's what we believe—that everything is a gift that comes from God. And we are stewards of that. We don't own it. It's not ours. It's all God's. But he gives it to us to manage."

For the religious leaders who unpacked what stewardship means for them, the vast majority identify that stewardship involves all resources, not just financial resources. A female mainline pastor said, "For me, theologically, all of the resources that we have: our money, our bodies, our intellect, our time, all of it is fully God's and that we make use of it for God. And so that stewardship piece of being the stewards of what God has entrusted to us, and I attempt not to say given to us because it's not actually ours, but it's all God's that we are stewarding or have been entrusted with." As illustrated by the quotations above, the majority of pastors using stewardship language were clear to point out that the concept of stewardship is not limited to money.

Indeed, when invoking stewardship as theological language, many explicitly made it clear that stewardship involves everything that we have, all resources and attributes. This was sometimes articulated as being important precisely because it is not just about money. A common way of unpacking this is the phrase 'time, talent, and treasure.' Twenty-three pastors used this particular phrase or a variant of it. Some pastors even mentioned that moving away from thinking of stewardship as being about money has been important for their congregation. A Lutheran (ELCA) male pastor said, "We have moved in the last couple of years away from thinking of stewardship in terms of money only, to thinking of stewardship in terms of time, talent, and money." He expounds further, "It's not just money.

We've gotten very clear in the last two years that we're never going to talk just about money because it's not just money." A Black Protestant pastor unpacked what stewardship means for his church: "When we see our life, our gifts, our talent, our resources as things that we're entrusted with versus what we own, and that God is expecting us to give back a report of how we used it, it changes how we see things."

And if stewardship extended beyond money to include all resources, for the majority of pastors, stewardship also related to the right *uses* of these resources. Interviewees assumed that stewardship could be broadly applied to the full Christian life. Whatever they were doing, they felt that stewardship should be a familiar concept in guiding the use of their 'time, treasure and talent.' While there were a few pastors criticizing some notions of stewardship, which will be explored later, there were no pastors suggesting that stewardship be defined as only about money, and, crucially, as only about the giving of money to churches.

4.3. What Does Stewardship Look Like? Stewardship as an Adjective

A striking discovery in our interviews was a notable contrast between how clergy understood stewardship when used as a noun from the occasions where stewardship was employed as an adjective. In its adjectival form, 'stewardship' was put to many different uses, but the vast majority of these indicated an implicit definition of stewardship that was much narrower and more precise.

One cluster of these adjectival uses focus on a time of the year, often the fall, when there is a particular emphasis on encouraging congregants to give: examples from the interviews include *stewardship season*, *stewardship month*, *stewardship time*, *stewardship drive*, *stewardship campaign*, and *stewardship sermon*. Within these uses, stewardship means something much more specific than the broad, sweeping definitions unpacked earlier. Stewardship functions as the giving of money by individuals to the church. Intriguingly, one instance of attempting to bring in the broader definition into this season of financial giving had, a Catholic priest suggested, a less positive financial outcome: "Well, stewardship, we generally think about it is involving time, talent and treasure. . .. So we asked people to think about making a contribution, not only their money, but their time. . .. The response to this has been more tepid than it is to financial giving. People generally respond fairly well to our request for them to make financial commitments. But when we've done stewardship of talent and stewardship of time cards in the same way we did, the money rate of return has been significantly lower. . .. So there's a little bit more work to do around that." In this instance, the application of the broader theological concept into the practice of giving led to an unexpected reduction in financial giving. That the broadening of stewardship to be more comprehensive became a challenge or problem for this parish to revisit reveals the multiple meanings and potential mixed messages latent in applying stewardship to church activities.

Another cluster of adjectival uses relates to who has the responsibility for encouraging giving and managing money: *stewardship pastor, stewardship committee, stewardship ministry,* and *stewardship leader*. Again, similarly to the first cluster, these roles are primarily focused on the church obtaining and using money, with the purpose being the financial resilience or sustainability of the congregation. Finances, of course, are very important for the health and vitality of the religious community. However, the adjectival use of stewardship works in the opposite direction of the broader theological definition offered by pastors. The former ends up modifying any focus of managing money for the church while the latter purports to explore the use of all resources in all of life.

The final cluster relates to educational efforts around stewardship: *stewardship class, stewardship workshop, stewardship meetings, stewardship education*, and *stewardship conference*. Of the three clusters, this one comes closest to hinting at how the broader definition of

stewardship, to some extent, may be incorporated into programs and activities. Many of the clergy that addressed stewardship education and workshops brought up how these programs included advice on personal financial management, particularly helping members of the congregation become free of debt. This serves as an example of how stewardship is being used as a concept beyond an explicit focus on church finances. However, while this cluster involves expanding the topic of stewardship outside of the walls of the church, it is still primarily interested in treasure, and much less so in time and talent.

4.4. What Is Good Stewardship? Stewardship, Fiscal Responsibility and Frugality

Alongside the prevalent use of stewardship as an adjective modifying aspects of church finances, there are also examples in the interviews of stewardship itself being modified, most commonly by 'wise' or 'good'. This moves the focus of stewardship from being a descriptive term about roles (God as owner, humans as stewards) to articulating the appropriate action of stewardship, what makes it 'good' or 'wise'. The clergy being interviewed spoke at different points about abundance and generosity, themes that are common in contemporary literature regarding money and resources. However, these themes did not emerge in the same context of stewardship. In fact, they often served to counter a particular view of stewardship that focused on frugality.

With 14 interviewees using the phrases of a 'good' or 'wise' steward, the majority of these pastors addressed 'good' and 'wise' steward in the context of responsible or frugal financial management. Good stewardship, within these interviews, related to reducing the amount of money spent by a congregation as much as possible. Even more directly, clergy focused on two particular aspects of congregational frugality: spending only on what is necessary and choosing lower cost goods and services. For one Catholic priest we interviewed, this involved very practical decisions: "I just think that we try to be good stewards of what comes in every week, and you know, we don't gild the cross gold, and we don't, we're not putting in oriental carpets here, you know? We fix roofs and things like that. Just putting on windows in the rectory here, $5000 is not much, but we just put new windows in to keep the place light and warm." The pastors employed a financial lens through which they spoke about being a good or wise steward.

Beyond finances, two interviewees included being a good steward of the congregation's building. A male Black Protestant pastor uses the concept of stewardship to critique his congregation's lack of financial responsibility in letting groups use their facilities at no charge: "It's not good biblical stewardship to just keep saying, 'Okay, it's fine. We're happy that you gave us nothing.' We love everybody. Open our building to everybody. We still don't charge the local townhouse association a nickel for using our space to get organized so that they can take over the townhouse. We don't charge them anything. We think it's something we should do for the community. But at some point the members have to take ownership of the fact that we are here for the community. We do things for the community, but it's our responsibility as church members to take care of what God has given us." As one of the major asset and liabilities of a congregation, 'good' stewardship of the building mattered.

Yet, almost all others explicitly referred to money. When asked about their theology of money, one pastor succinctly commented, "Be very frugal, right?". Another evangelical pastor responded, "We have tried to be very, very frugal and good stewards of the money we have." This follows the pattern identified earlier—the uses of the word stewardship and steward focus almost exclusively on 'treasure', with time and talent fading into the background.

This focus on a good steward being cautious with spending and being financially responsible is not without tension. One mainline pastor demonstrated this tension in

making sense of stewardship in her interview: "And the problem, I don't know, if it's with every church, certainly churches in our tradition; people who oversee the money, the board of trustees. . .. I don't know, they morph into somebody different, when they get on the board. But they also are very protective of the money and very. . .. Well, they just think that that's their job. And I need new members, so we can get more money. And you get it, because they feel an enormous responsibility to be good stewards of the money but nonetheless." In this instance, the pastor wants to spend some money, presumably on programming or hospitality to attract new members. However, her approach is in tension with the board's reluctance to spend money "because they feel and enormous responsibility to be good stewards of the money."

4.5. Signs of Critique: Resisting the Stewardship Paradigm

While a minor theme in the interviews, there are times where stewardship language is rejected, and in both instances in favor of the word 'generosity'. A mainline female pastor comments, "We don't call it stewardship. Stewardship is way too loaded in today's cultural context. So, we use generosity. We felt generosity is a much easier all-round conversation. And we believe that one of the fruits of the spirit is not stewardship. One of the fruits of the spirit is actually generosity. We change language all the time here. So, people don't get caught up in the layers of the language, freshness in the invitation." With a slightly different emphasis, another mainline male pastor contrasts stewardship and generosity: "We changed our Stewardship Committee, it's called the Generosity Team. And we just got rid of the word stewardship altogether. It's a great word, but people just hear dollars when they hear stewardship. 'Oh, great. You want me to be on the Stewardship Team?' No, we want you to be on the Generosity Team. And it's really the greatest team to be on because it's giving Jesus away."

5. Discussion: Stewardship, a Fork in the Road?

Across our analysis of over 80 Christian clergy, it is clear that steward and stewardship remain the most consistently employed language for congregational leaders when addressing money. Yet, it is also clear that while pervasive, stewardship is not imbued with a single agreed upon meaning. In fact, as sociologist Robert Wuthnow (1993) wrote over three decades ago now, "Stewardship has lost much of its meaning. . . Stewardship is perceived by the public to mean either something as narrow as charitable giving or something so broad that it has virtually no specific implications." He would go on to say, "Stewardship, when it is discussed, is presented in so many difference guises that people can interpret it pretty much as they like. When they do so, moreover, they prefer vague understandings that make little difference to how they should behave from day to day" (Wuthnow 1994, p. 144).

From our interviews, it is clear that stewardship is not an empty word, as it carries within it a significant theological claim about ownership. However, these interviews suggest that the significant—and perhaps even radical—theological origin of the concept appears to get left behind when it is put to practical use by religious leaders. When describing what stewardship is, these leaders articulate that stewardship is about the use of all resources, time, talent, and treasure on all occasions. When referring to the use of stewardship within the life of the congregation, however, stewardship immediately has a much narrower focus. It is all about money, and predominantly how congregants can be encouraged to give financially to the church. This gap between intent and use must, at best, be confusing for those in the pews. This is further complicated by how the current understanding of the 'good' steward has become shaped predominantly by frugality, or some version of fiscal responsibility.

Other themes such as abundance, plenitude, generosity, and being a 'cheerful giver' have been explored in much recent popular theological literature and are present in the NSCEP interview data as well. However, these themes appear to be most often disconnected from stewardship. In fact, when these themes emerge, they are often employed as an explicit critique of a theological understanding of stewardship that focuses on possession or frugality. If not explicit critique, leaders admit their frustration in the limitations of stewardship that have become either too vague, relatively programmatic, or simply the pragmatic, utilitarian language of the 'business' of securing and managing the church's finances.

While often seen as a taboo topic that many religious leaders have often been inclined to ignore, congregations are having to think and talk about money and resources more and more. The 'economics' of congregations are undergoing a significant shift. Declining religious affiliation and participation as well as declines in institutional trust and engagement patterns are shaping how people give and the expectations for how congregations engage their communities. In addition, deferred maintenance on buildings, increasing insurance costs, and inflation are affecting expenses. As pastors are grasping for language, theologically and practically, to address these issues of money, buildings, staff, etc., to what extent does the dominant concept of stewardship help?

Given Christian clergy's current need for theological and practical ways of thinking and acting regarding the resources necessary to sustain their congregations, is the concept of stewardship up to the task? Does the historic legacy of the term, most clearly shown by 'stewardship Sunday' and the connection to tithes and offerings, mean that stewardship is ultimately unable to be effectively used for other purposes? In this sense, stewardship has been calcified—stuck with a historic legacy that it cannot shake. In contrast, does the broad, expansive definition of stewardship—of time, talent, and treasure—and the de-emphasizing of money mean that pastors end up talking less about money than they would like or need to?

Does a stewardship frame try to do too much? Just as Wuthnow worried, at some level across our interviews, it is true that stewardship is used as a large, all-embracing theological concept that relates to every conceivable kind of resource and subsequent use of that resource. Here, stewardship runs the risk of being an 'amoeba' word—able to be put to any conceivable use (Illich 2002). Precisely because stewardship could mean anything, it often ends up meaning nothing. There is an oddity here, a concept that, due to its history and current use, is both, at the same time, too rigid and too fluid.

It seems as if there is a fork in the road, and there are two options for Christian clergy: either rehabilitate stewardship language or retire it. Either work towards greater congruence between the definition of stewardship and its use, explore more deeply what the nature of a good or wise steward is, or find new language and concepts to think and talk about money and resources. Robert Wood Lynn and D. Susan Wisely conclude their historical survey of stewardship in American Protestantism with their estimation that stewardship as conceptualized and practiced today may no longer be up to the task that the church needs: "...In the recent period, the notion of stewardship has been drained of its power. The 'amazing pressure' to raise money has sapped stewardship's vitality by restricting its meaning to fund-raising. Similarly, efforts to breathe new life into the word have stretched it to apply to such a vast array of responsibilities that its meaning is diluted beyond recognition. Both this constriction and expansion of its meaning have wrung power from it. It may be, like other worthy ideas before it, that the notion of stewardship has run its course." (Lynn and Wisely 2012, p 362).

Standing at this fork in the road, we are inclined to agree with Lynn and Wisely; it may make more sense to retire the concept of stewardship than make another attempt to rehabilitate it. What theological concepts and practices might take its place? While it is

beyond the scope of this article to outline all the credible alternatives, as faith communities continue to evolve, we believe even greater attention to the economic issues interwoven in their congregations and communities will be necessary. This is a task of some urgency to which pastors and theologians must now attend.

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Notes

[1] The words 'stewardship' and 'steward' were not part of the main interview script, though it was an optional example for the question 'Have you received any training or mentoring about congregation finances (e.g., fundraising, financial management, or stewardship)?'

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Article

Future Congregational Leaders: How Do They Perceive Their Opportunities in This Field?

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Abstract: The expectations, plans and goals of future pastors are developed and consolidated during theological studies. These plans and expectations, and the career strategies based on them can have a decisive influence on how gender-based differences with respect to opportunities in the churches develop. Since one of the particularities of the pastoral vocation is that work and private life are closely intertwined and difficult to separate, the personal choices of prospective pastors are crucial in shaping their professional careers. The results of our research based on focus group interviews conducted with female and male Protestant seminarians in Hungary suggest that female theology students are more reserved and cautious in their articulation of plans than their male counterparts. On the one hand, they assume that factors outside and above them may override them and that the conservative church environment may constrain their options. On the other hand, it was repeatedly expressed that, as women, they find it difficult to reconcile pastoral work and family life, and take it for granted that they will compromise more in the professional field. Only a few of the female participants plan to work as independent congregational leaders (senior pastors), whereas this ambition is very typical of male students.

Keywords: professional plans of male and female theology students; pastoral vocation; congregational leaders; gendered expectations; focus group interviews

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been an increasingly clear trend of growing female participation in church leadership around the world, with more and more congregations being led by women pastors. It is well known that the majority of Protestant churches now ordain women ministers without discrimination and with full equality of rights: 83% of Protestant believers belong to a church that ordains women (Zurlo 2024). This is a fairly recent development by historical standards: although the first female pastor was ordained in the United States as early as the mid-19th century, in most countries and in most churches, women's equal ministry has only been in existence for roughly half a century (LWF 2016; Mantei and Bergmann 2017). However, as we have also seen in the secular professional sphere, equality has not automatically meant de facto equal professional participation and opportunities. Several studies support the fact that various forms of vertical and horizontal segregation are still present in churches today (cf., e.g., Finlay 1996; Charlton 1997; Chang 2005; Offenberger 2013; Schleifer and Miller 2017; Zurlo 2024), the "stained glass ceiling" (Purvis 1995; Sullins 2000) effectively prevents women from reaching higher church positions.

Nevertheless, the past decades have seen many changes, and in many Western Protestant churches, not only has the proportion of women pastors increased, but there has also

been a growing presence of women as independent pastors leading congregations and in senior leadership positions in churches (Lee 2024). This is an important finding, even if some researchers warn that women in prominent leadership roles act as a kind of 'token' to deflect attention away from the difficulties of women's professional advancement, portraying them as a consequence of individual choices and intentions (Nesbitt 2013). In Hungary, however, there is little evidence of this change. In the Reformed Church in Hungary, by far the largest church ordaining women in Hungary, there are no women in senior leadership positions: there are no women in the deanery, bishop, or deputy bishop positions. In the second largest, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary, women hold positions up to the level below bishop, but their proportion is lower than their presence in the pastoral ranks. No woman has ever reached the position of bishop in any of the Protestant churches in Hungary that ordain women.

The plans and expectations of current seminarians can have a decisive impact on how gender inequalities in the churches, and as part of this, the opportunities and leadership of women in the churches, will develop in the near future. Our research aims to contribute to an understanding of how this may change as younger generations of pastors enter the workplace, with an increasing number of women everywhere, including Hungary. We conducted focus group interviews with Protestant theology students who are preparing for a career as pastors. Our research questions relate, on the one hand, to what gender differences and similarities can be observed between theology students' interpretations of their vocational plans and goals as well as their perceived work–life balance possibilities in the pastoral career, and on the other hand, to how theology students perceive the opportunities of women and men in the pastoral career, what main difficulties they identify, and how they see women in leadership roles in congregations and the church.

Although our research explores experiences and discourses in Hungary, we believe that our findings can also be useful elsewhere, as the disadvantages faced by women in churches follow a similar pattern in most countries (cf., e.g., Finlay 1996; Charlton 1997; Chang 2005; Offenberger 2013; Schleifer and Miller 2017; Chaves et al. 2021; Lee 2024; Zurlo 2024). Our research shows that even though women and men seem to be equal in pastoral ministry and there is a more balanced gender ratio in training, women still take on leadership or more complex roles much less frequently than men, and this shows in the plans of students who are preparing for pastoral ministry. Women are more likely to plan becoming assistant pastors or institutional pastors than senior pastors, and they are more likely than men to expect to make compromises in their pastoral work due to family commitments.

2. Theoretical Background

To outline the theoretical background of our research, we first describe the specificities that need to be taken into account when looking at women's entry into leadership roles in Hungary. We then discuss the specificities of the church sector in terms of women's career opportunities. Finally, we will discuss the general theoretical explanations for the persistence of women's disadvantages in terms of power, leadership, and decision-making positions despite formal equality of rights.

2.1. Women in Leadership in Hungary

In all areas, women's chances of getting into leadership positions in Hungary are definitely worse than in most Western European countries and are below the EU average. As in most European countries, women's educational attainment has gradually caught up with and then surpassed men's in recent decades. Around 60% of young people with tertiary education (25–34 year olds) are women, with a significantly higher proportion of

women in this age group holding a degree than men, while there are more men among early school leavers (Eurostat 2023c). This increasing investment in human capital could lead to a rapidly increasing proportion of women in leadership positions in all sectors, but this is not the case. Although the share of women in managerial positions is a little above the EU average (around 37% of such positions are held by women), Hungary is one of the few European countries where this share has fallen slightly over the last ten years (Eurostat 2023a). According to the latest report of the European Institute for Gender Equality, although the labor market situation of Hungarian women is better than the EU average (higher employment rates and a slightly lower relative employment disadvantage compared to men), Hungary scores the lowest on the dimension of power of all the countries surveyed. This means that Hungarian women are at the greatest disadvantage in leadership and decision-making positions in political, economic, and social spheres (EIGE 2024). In all three areas, women are barely represented in senior management positions: their political representation is extremely low, and the proportion of women is one-third of the EU average, only 11% among the members of the board of directors, supervisory board, or management board of the largest listed companies (EIGE 2024). Horizontal segregation also exists: both at secondary and tertiary educational level, women are more represented in occupational choices in fields that are expected to offer lower prestige and income, while in STEM fields offering the best labor market prospects, women are still underrepresented (Lannert and Nagy 2019). The best summary indicator of gender-based disadvantage is the wage gap: on the one hand, it condenses the consequences of an individual's education, skills, previous labor market experience and expected future participation, and on the other hand, it is a summary indicator of the socio-economic recognition of individuals. As a consequence of the above factors, the pay gap for women in Hungary is above the EU average (close to 18%) and has been slightly increasing in recent years (Eurostat 2023b).

One of the reasons for this gap may be that the perception of gender roles in Hungarian society became more conservative after the regime change. In the 2000s, attitudes shifted somewhat towards egalitarianism, but support for traditional gender roles is still relatively strong, especially with regard to the division of family tasks (Tóth 1995; Braun and Scott 2009; Gregor 2016; Spéder 2023). Although support for the caring role of the father has also increased in recent years (Drjenovszky and Sztáray Kézdy 2023a, 2023b), women are still expected to take on the role of primary caregiver in the home. There is also another factor that the public policies have clearly shifted towards familialism in the last decade and a half (Nagy et al. 2018), which have made care tasks the responsibility of families—and thus essentially of women (Leitner 2003). As a consequence, achieving a work–life balance is more challenging for women and is already taken into account by women in the career planning process (Rudnák et al. 2023), which can be an effective barrier to a higher share of women in leadership roles.

Despite improving trends, women are disadvantaged compared to men in all European countries in terms of their chances of achieving senior positions, but women in Hungary face relatively greater disadvantages compared to men. Their role in power and leadership is less accepted, and caring responsibilities effectively limit their leadership engagement in practical terms. This general situation should be borne in mind when considering women's leadership in churches and congregations.

2.2. Women's Careers in the Church

Although the processes in the churches are in many ways similar to those in the secular professions, in some respects the churches also represent a more difficult terrain for women to reach leadership positions than the secular professions. One of the main reasons for this is the link between traditional gender order and religiosity: a number of studies show that

in religious communities the traditional gender order based on the complementary roles of the breadwinner and the caregiver is more accepted (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Seguino 2011). On the one hand, this makes the persistence of inequalities in the professional field generally more acceptable in the church context, and on the other hand, the gendered division of family tasks and the traditional family model also make it more difficult for women to advance in their careers from a practical point of view (Török and Biró 2023b).

While religiosity and church affiliation suggest a traditional understanding of gender roles, women pastors are also representatives of women's equality, as they are working in a position that until a few decades ago was closed to women and in some respects clearly contradicts the traditional female role. This may even move them towards an egalitarian understanding of gender roles. When women, in any field, are working in professions or positions considered 'masculine', the demand for women's equality and equal opportunities, for full participation in society, often comes into conflict, to a lesser or greater extent, with traditional expectations of gender roles (Wright 2014; Cha 2013; Powell and Sang 2015), and this may be particularly true in the church. This tension can also influence women pastors' perceptions of expectations, difficulties and career opportunities, as well as the professional choices they make and the strategies they pursue in relation to their ministry careers.

These decisions can be significantly influenced by the experience of unequal opportunities in the churches. Several studies over the past decades have consistently shown that women pastors often find it harder to obtain jobs in congregations, or they obtain jobs of lower status, and that there is a growing lack of women leaders at higher levels of the church hierarchy, even in churches where there is formally full equality (Finlay 1996; Charlton 1997; Sullins 2000; Chang 2005; Hoegeman 2017). This is especially interesting in light of the fact that Christian women are clearly more religious compared to men: they attend church more often and pray more often, and they identify themselves as religious more often (Pew Research Center 2016; Klein et al. 2017). Although there is not much difference in church membership, women are more active members of congregations (Zurlo 2024). However, this more active involvement is not reflected at the leadership level. Not only are women less likely to lead congregations, but they are also more likely to serve in smaller congregations with poorer financial conditions and thus lower prestige (McDuff 2001; Chaves et al. 2021; Lee 2024). This may limit the opportunities for women pastors to influence and gain recognition in their communities (Konieczny and Chaves 2000).

Besides vertical segregation, horizontal segregation is also present in churches. Women pastors are less likely than men to be assigned to congregations, while they are more often found in specialized, institutional pastoral occupations such as a school chaplain or prison chaplain (Nesbitt 1997; Chang 2005; De Gasquet 2010). Angelika Wetterer (1999), looking at secular occupations, has described the process as 'marginalizing integration' whereby women have their barriers to entry in certain professions removed, but are directed towards what are considered less important, lower-ranking, perhaps ad hoc, 'special' tasks within the profession. According to Ursula Offenberger (2013), the same process can be observed in the pastoral field: institutional pastoral positions are considered lower-prestige jobs compared to those of the congregational pastor, and this division of labor contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities in churches.

All these phenomena can also be observed in the Protestant churches in Hungary. In examining this issue, it should be borne in mind that after the fall of communism, the Hungarian churches found themselves in a contradictory situation: they were trying to restore the pre-socialist conditions and to develop a way of functioning that would meet the challenges of the new era (Huszár 2011). As a result, in some areas of church functioning, more traditional ways of thinking and practices became prevalent compared to

Western Protestant churches, and this also affected the role of women. In addition to this, as mentioned above, the attitude of Hungarian churches towards gender roles is part of a more conservative public thinking than that of Western European churches. Earlier Hungarian research (Orisek 1999; Fekete 2006; Huszár 2011) showed that expected difficulties also influenced women preparing for a pastoral career, with many of them either imagining and planning their future as members of a pastoral couple or orienting themselves towards institutional pastoral positions.

2.3. Theories Explaining Women's Disadvantages

Historically, much of the gender gap in careers and earnings has been explained by differences in education and occupational choices. Today, however, the disadvantage of women can no longer be explained by differences in productivity or human capital skills. Several explanations have been put forward to explain why inequalities persist in the face of full formal equality, and with increasing labor market participation, and with higher educational attainment than men. While a full review of these is not possible in the present context, we highlight below some of the approaches that may help make sense of the processes within the Church.

Cecilia Ridgeway argues that cultural beliefs about gender that disadvantage women play an important role in the persistence of female disadvantage (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004; Ridgeway 2011). Expectation states theory emphasizes that gender is a diffuse status characteristic that underlies widely shared expectations about individuals' performance in interactions, and that these expectations influence behavior and decisions (Correll and Ridgeway 2006). These expectations attribute women with less competence and lower performance in task-oriented situations, while they form high demands regarding caregiving and community roles (Carli and Eagly 2007). Expectations of motherhood are particularly strong (Ridgeway and Correll 2004), making it difficult for women to engage with their careers with the same intensity after having children as before (Nagy 2016). Preference theory emphasizes the importance of women's own choices rather than external expectations (Hakim 2002, 2006). According to this theory, women in the Western world now have a genuine choice. Therefore, to understand their situation it is necessary to understand their preferences in relation to work and family: on this basis Hakim distinguished between home-centered, adaptive, and work-centered women (Hakim 2002). Claudia Goldin (2021) emphasizes the role of "greedy work" in the perpetuation of inequality. Goldin sees that today firms in most fields continue to disproportionately reward long hours, overtime, and continuous availability. This makes it difficult to reconcile career and caring responsibilities, regardless of gender, and typically puts women at a disadvantage. Thus, further closing the gender gap can only be achieved by changing the structure of work (Goldin 2021).

When looking at inequalities in the church, there are other specific aspects in addition to the above. Such special factors include certain traditional biblical and theological interpretations (Purser and O'Brien 2021; Zurlo 2024), which are present to varying degrees in different churches, and they can be effective barriers to women's careers. These factors and the greater acceptance of traditional gender roles in religious communities may reinforce different expectations about the roles of men and women in church life (Zurlo 2024).

According to Barbara Finlay (1996), the differences in male and female church career paths are at least partly due to the different preferences of women pastors compared to men, for example, women prefer smaller congregations with more personal interaction and personal support. In connection with this, some studies suggest that women judge their work from different perspectives, in which the spiritual and subjective factors of their work may be more salient, compared to men, for whom material and objective factors may be more important (McDuff 2001).

It is also an important question from a leadership perspective whether women implement a different pastoral role concept and thus a different leadership style than men. As early as 1987, Martha Long Ice concluded in her book that women have a different approach, and prefer a more egalitarian, collaborative, personal and flexible pastoral role, with a focus on responsibility and care, as opposed to a more hierarchical and competitive approach, which is seen as masculine (Ice 1987). Verifying this hypothesis, Perl's later study confirmed that women devote more time to pastoral care and pastoral work based on personhood (Perl 2002). This difference in leadership style may also reflect wider societal expectations of gender roles and the caring qualities often attributed to women. The different leadership style may also be a factor that makes it more difficult for women pastors to be accepted in leadership positions in church circles with more traditional views on gender roles.

Finally, it is important to note that the persistence of traditional male leadership structures in churches has created a positive feedback loop: the lack of female representation at the highest levels of leadership discourages women from participation and engagement at both symbolic and practical levels (Purser and O'Brien 2021).

Gina Zurlo summarizes that the barriers to women's advancement in the churches stem from gendered social norms and power inequalities, as well as cultural expectations that place women at a distinct disadvantage compared to men (Zurlo 2024). In light of this, a key question seems to be the extent to which soon-to-be-career seminarians internalize the expectations that link the two genders to differential competences in terms of effectiveness, performance, decision-making skills, and thus suitability for leadership roles, and the extent to which these expectations influence the professional plans and decisions of theology students.

3. Methods

In our research, we conducted four focus group interviews with Protestant theology students who are preparing for a career in the ministry. We organized gender homogeneous groups, i.e., two female and two male groups, to observe the female and male discourses on opportunities in the pastoral career, the role of gender within the church, and perceptions of future pastors of the other gender without being influenced by the presence of the other gender.

The focus group method provides an opportunity both to learn about the personal experiences that shape the theological students' goals and their perceived or planned possibilities, and to explore the discourses that prevail among students on these issues.

The two women's groups and one of the men's group consisted of ten participants, while the other men's group had four participants. The groups were advertised on the basis of voluntary applications, with no selection criteria other than gender. The students studied at the theology department of a Protestant church in Budapest, Hungary. The group members were deeply interested in each other's opinions and experiences, hoping to learn from them and benefit from them in their careers and well-being. Thus, after initial encouragement, conversations and verbal and non-verbal interactions in the groups unfolded spontaneously, and they were eager to respond to the topics and questions raised by the moderators. In the men's groups, there was sometimes a cautiousness regarding their opinions expressed about the opportunities and perceptions of women pastors, and sometimes a tendency to conform their responses to perceived social expectations, or at least to express opinions that may conflict with these presumed norms in a softened way. In the women's groups, the desire to support and reinforce each other was more strongly felt, despite the fact that they did not agree on every issue. Here, women's group participants also supported each other in expressing minority opinions, but sometimes this required

moderator reinforcement. The verbal and non-verbal interactions that emerged in the focus groups suggested that group members reacted and reflected on what each other had said, lively discussions unfolded, sometimes comparing different views, but participants were careful to avoid conflict and respected each other's occasionally different experiences and opinions.

The focus groups were video-recorded for methodological recommendations and for the purpose of better observing the interactions within the group, providing thorough and appropriate information for the participants and obtaining their consent. The focus groups lasted over an hour and a half each. Written transcripts of the recordings were made, anonymized, and sensitive information deleted. The transcripts were processed using the inductive thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2006). Focus group transcripts were coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti 9.1.7 qualitative data analysis software. Although the coding was largely inductive, the themes of the focus group guide provided clues for structuring the analysis. In the following analysis, we support our conclusions with quotes from the transcripts. When quoting focus group discussions, we only indicate whether the quotes are from a male or female group. In the case of focus groups, the emphasis is not on individual experiences, but on the discourses and the different, possibly conflicting, arguments. Partly for this reason, and partly to better protect the anonymity of participants, we do not separately identify speakers within the group, and where we quote from a longer discussion, we separate individual speakers with hyphens. Where it is not clear from the context, the letters M and F are used to distinguish between quotes from male and female groups.

4. Results

In presenting the research results, we first describe the professional plans of female and male theological students for their pastoral careers, i.e., in which areas and in which positions within the profession they can best imagine themselves. Then we will present what goals they have set themselves, what they would like to achieve in their careers, and what they mean by "goals" in general. In the third part of the presentation of the results, the relationship between personal and professional plans, the perception of work–life balance opportunities will be discussed, and finally, the discussion in the men's and women's groups on the opportunities and difficulties for women in the church, and the opinions expressed on women's ministry and leadership will be presented.

4.1. Gender-Specific Plans for the Ministry

As discussed in the theoretical section, the career disadvantages of women are clear in the Protestant churches in Hungary. Previous research on the strategies of women pastors has also shown that women pastors take these disadvantages into account in their professional decisions as external constraints (Török and Biró 2023b). However, through their pastoral and congregational leadership, the growing numbers of women pastors are also shaping the functioning of churches as well as the gender inequalities in the church. Therefore, it is important to investigate to what extent the impact of vertical and horizontal segregation is reflected in the professional plans of female and male theology students, i.e., to what extent they experience gender-specific expectations about the tasks and roles they will have in the church. The way the students respond to these expectations, whether their decisions and strategies conform to these expectations, whether they incorporate these expectations into their future professional plans or challenge them, will largely determine the future of churches in relation to gender inequality.

The analysis of the focus group interviews showed that there are clear gender-specific differences in the career plans of women and men who are now studying theology. In the

groups of male theology students, there was essentially a consensus that they envisioned their career as a congregational pastor. This was seen as a kind of base ("*I think the starting point is the most general, the congregational pastor*"), alongside which some would like to pursue other activities: "*I would definitely like to be a congregational pastor, but I definitely want something else alongside it.*" The plans of female theology students are much more varied than those of male students; although they refer to the role of congregational pastor, many mention missionary work ("*sharing the gospel with people who don't yet know about God*"), or working with marginalized groups and especially various forms of institutional pastoral care. In particular, the need to work with children, families, and young people, which fits in well with traditional expectations of women, was frequently raised in women's groups. It is important to note that, although missionary work or teaching (as an additional activity) was also mentioned in some cases in the men's groups, there was not a single male student in either group who had any plans to work in any kind of institutional pastoral position. "*The reason I can't see myself in these situations is because it runs on too much of a single plane*," explained one of them.

There was also a marked difference between the male and female groups in terms of their plans for the position of congregational pastor. In the men's groups, it was almost natural for the congregational pastorate to be, after an initial transition period, the position of a senior pastor of the congregation: "*associate pastor and then senior pastor*". Some even explicitly stated that they would only consider the position of associate pastor on a temporary basis: "*I can't imagine myself as an associate pastor. For two years at the most, until I really get into it and see exactly how it has to be done.*" In the women's groups, on the contrary, several stressed that they would prefer an associate pastor position. Although there were also some women who had a pastorate in charge of a congregation in their plans, they often added that "*if I see myself as a congregational pastor, I might prefer to be in a smaller congregation.*" The extent to which the strong aspiration to lead a congregation was taken for granted much less in the women's groups is illustrated by the fact that when one of the women participants, in discussing her plans, simply stated "*I would like to be a pastor leading a congregation*", the others spontaneously applauded.

Reluctance to engage in congregational leadership among women has been seen in two main contexts. One was the incompatibility with traditional family roles: "*I don't see it as compatible with motherhood*", said one of the women participants, later adding as a justification that "*both motherhood and ministry require a whole heart*". The potential conflict between the role of the church pastor and that of the mother of a family, and possible solutions to it, emerged both as a perceived external expectation and as a personal preference in the women's groups. This topic will be elaborated in the chapter on work–life balance.

The other context that emerged was disaffection with leadership. On the one hand, this was expressed in the form of different preferences: "*I would gladly be in a subordinate pastoral position. I wouldn't need a leadership role because I think I prefer to support others. And I believe that I would have more freedom in that role.*" There are two distinct aspects in this statement: a preference for a support role, which fits in with traditional expectations of women, and a need for greater freedom of action, which does not. On the other hand, the aversion to leadership also appeared in the form of a mismatch between femininity and the role as church leader. This also appears as an external expectation and constraint for female seminarians. As one of them recalled: "*I have often been told that it's great that you will be a pastor, but you don't want to be a senior pastor, do you, but some kind of associate pastor?*" Moreover, this mismatch was also internalized by some of the female students. "*I couldn't lead a congregation by myself, so I couldn't imagine in 10 years' time driving the aunts and uncles in a 9-seater minibus (...). I would need someone to always have the last word, or to make*

decisions sometimes, if I had to." But the leadership role associated with men appears also more profound at the level of belief. "*I need him [the husband] to be able to lead me a little bit in my faith (...) so it would be best if he had more faith than I do, so that he could pull me, because I think it's the man's job to pull the woman, or well, to lead the woman.*" These thoughts emerged in both of the quoted statements in the context of the female pastor's consideration of spousal preference.

The plans of female and male students for their pastoral careers are certainly not independent of their image of the "ideal" or "good" pastor. While the image of the pastor that emerged in the discussions in the men's and women's groups was similar in many respects, there were some clear gender-specific shifts in emphasis. Authenticity and self-identity were central themes for both men and women. In the case of women, this discussion shifted to 'honesty', the 'human' nature of the pastor, the ability to "*admit when you are tired*" or, as one participant put it, not to be ideal pastors, but "*good enough pastors*". The fact that these boundaries were so pronounced for women in contrast to men may again be an indication that the work–life balance is experienced differently. For men, at this point, the conversation tended to turn from 'authenticity' and 'self-identity' more towards the qualities needed for leadership, such as reliability, a strong character, and a 'definite posture'. The qualities needed for pastoral leadership were often mentioned in connection with the image of the pulpit, in the same sentence, as in this case: "*I think you need a strong character first. Because you have to stand in the pulpit and speak to people (...). And to be totally reliable.*" In the light of this, it is not surprising that, as we have seen above, the congregational pastor as a career image is more strongly present in men's plans than in women's: for men, the pastor is the one who stands in the pulpit and preaches. This is less important in the women's image of the pastor.

4.2. Goals: What Men and Women Want to Achieve in Ministry

In all focus groups there was a great caution about setting goals for their careers. This is understandable, since pastors are not led to the ministry by their own decision, but by God's calling (Christopherson 1994; Niemelä 2011), and thus may feel that the goals belong to God rather than to themselves. Although this basic attitude was expressed in all groups, there was a noticeable difference: men were more reluctant to start speaking about their goals—they were more explicit in deflecting the question. One male participant explained: "*so it's not like there's a ladder of ranks where you go up and up and up, because you can serve in a small village for 40 years.*" This clearly shows that their reticence was at least partly due to the fact that they automatically interpreted the term 'goal' in the question (question: 'What do you want to achieve in the ministry? What are your goals?') as a career goal, a promotion in the hierarchy. Previous research has shown that men are more inclined than women to interpret a pastoral career in this way (Nesbitt 1997). In our case, this interpretation appeared to discourage theology students from declaring their goals. In the women's groups, this was an easier question because the goal was not—or not only—interpreted as a career goal, and the importance of setting goals was also raised: "*I think it is essential, not only in this vocation but in this one in particular, that we always have something in front of us, so that we know that we have to serve in this particular way and go in this particular direction, because otherwise this profession is so, so multifaceted that we can get lost.*" Nevertheless, the women's groups also stressed the subordination of their own goals and their own will to the will of God. There was also an exchange of views on the suggestion of other terms to replace 'goal', with the greatest consensus around the term 'desire'. However, in response to this, a cautious counter-argument emerged in one of the women's groups: "*it [the discussion] is as if God has a great will over my life and I have to passively go along with it and therefore I can't have active desires and active goals and really only directions to give. (...) But what about the visions in*

the Bible, what about when I actively offer my talents and not bury them? So I'm very much looking for what it means for me to actively engage with the will of God and make it my own, and not just drift with it."

Once we managed to move the conversation away from the idea of a goal as a career goal, the male and female groups had quite similar goals. One of these was community building: "*the congregations I will be in, I will be able to gather a very good church community and lead people to God.*" (F). "*A happy community is cohesive, helpful, and that if anyone is in trouble, they will help them out and it's good to be in a community like that. And that if someone can achieve that by the grace of God I think there is no greater goal than that.*" (M). Reaching out to young people was also mentioned several times in each group ("*I want to get young people to see that believing in God is a cool thing to do.*" M). Many of them also consider this important because they themselves have come close to faith in such youth communities ("*to give back a little of what I have received, so that new young people can also get to know it*" F).

Overall, it appeared that their career socialization made the theology students reluctant to explicitly formulate their goals for their own pastoral work, or at least they are averse to the notion of "goal" as a worldly one. It was particularly strongly felt in the men's groups that the primary association of the word 'goal' is with career advancement, which they therefore avert.

4.3. Personal Plans and Work–Life Balance Options

Over the past decades, several studies have shown that religiosity is associated with a preference for traditional gender and family roles (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Seguino 2011), which is typically reflected in the higher number of children in pastoral families in Hungary. However, the traditional ideal of the pastoral family with many children was based more on the image of the male pastor and the pastor's wife supporting him in his work and taking over all the family-care tasks. Consequently, it may be more difficult for female pastors, especially those who lead congregations independently, to implement this ideal; moreover, their position may even cause role conflicts (Charlton 1997; Hildenbrand 2013). It was also clear from the focus group discussions that, although both male and female students anticipate work–life tensions, the unreflected image of the traditional pastoral family emerged more frequently in the future plans of men than women. In the men's groups, the "big family", "3–4 children", was often mentioned: "*To have a family, which would include a wife and, I think, around 3–4 children, that would be appropriate.*" Women were more likely to consider the compatibility of their work and private lives when formulating not only their professional but also their personal plans. "*Because I can see that there are bigger families, and it's harder to look after the children there, and I feel that with two children I could maybe—maybe? Well, I would certainly have time for the congregation.*" It was also clear that women face stronger expectations from their environment when it comes to establishing a family. In one group of women in particular, there was a very emotional discussion about the reactions of their environment to this, which many experienced as external pressure. It seemed to be a common experience for many that "*several people warned me that if I go into the ministry as a woman or I am here in the theology field, I should be willing to choose a pastor husband.*" According to the female group members, only one thing seemed to be more important to those who formulated these expectations than having a pastor as a husband, and that was that you should be married.: "*This goes on for a while, trying to push you towards choosing a pastor as a husband, and then there comes a point where they switch to [any] husband. And then it doesn't matter anymore, just get married.*" The phrase "point" obviously refers to the women's age. Although during the conversation the participants treated these revelations with some irony ("- *You must be married by the age of 25 and have three children by the age of 30.—No, four children!—Five! [Laughs]*"), they aroused intense emotions. The

sentence "*There is every realistic chance that I might remain single*" did not stand out in the male participants' discussion, but such a statement would have been unthinkable in female groups. Interestingly, the male participant who made the statement quoted above would consider this option a good one precisely because of the reverse (life-to-work) spillover effects: "*I am afraid that it would have a very big impact on my service, that family life would take it away.*" A similar attitude did not emerge in the female groups.

Work–life balance issues and potential conflicts between work and family are of particular importance in this professional field. Work and private life, professional and private decisions, and public and private spaces and times are intertwined in a way that is not typical of secular professions (Török and Biró 2023a). Private life decisions, especially in the views of women, have a major influence on the role they can and want to take in the life of the congregation. Both female and male respondents agreed that work and family life in the congregational pastoral vocation can be difficult to separate, and that this can have rather negative work-to-family spillover effects. "*For me, the protection of my home is very important, and I haven't seen a good example of parochial life where the boundaries were clear and flexible, but the congregation didn't intrude.*" *(F).* "*I believe that in pastor families, the parents' work greatly influences the family. Especially if both are pastors, this would put even more of a stamp on it.*" *(M).* Both female and male students are very aware of this problem and try to prepare themselves to deal with the problems of the boundaries between work and private life. "*One must clearly separate the time dedicated specifically to personal life, and during that time, one must not allow the demands of the ministry to take away from family time. (...) Nonetheless, it is very important for the pastor to set aside specific time to be with their family, and nothing should disrupt that.*" *(M).* "*I think a good pastor is one who can say, 'This is how much I can handle and no more.' And I need an associate pastor, I need an assistant pastor, I need a religious educator. Someone who can admit this and is strong enough to say, 'This is how much I can take on without burning out.' In my life, I need to have time for my family, for myself, and for God.*" *(F).*

While the problem itself was identified in basically similar terms in both male and female groups, gender-specific views were appearing on how to deal with the problem. Women and men see different ways of achieving and supporting work–life balance. For men, an important way to maintain work–life balance is to preserve the traditional pastoral family, with the man as the lead pastor and the wife in a supportive role. This was sometimes relatively explicit in the discussions, but mostly male group members were very cautious in articulating these views, as if they felt that this ran counter to some presumed normative expectation. "*I am not very particular about housework, but I'm obviously not shy about having to grab something in the kitchen or basically at home, I'm helping out where I can at the moment, too. However, I would be happy to have a wife who is good at that sort of thing.*" Expectations of a traditional supportive female role not only in the home, but also in the professional context, were also reflected in the men's interviews: "*I don't think it's a disadvantage if she can support me in my vocation. (...) I think it would be good if she could do a secular profession as well, and on Sundays, or even if not only on Sundays, but that she could support me in some way on weekdays too.*"

Women's groups preferred to approach the problem in terms of sharing tasks and responsibilities or, as discussed earlier, being honest about the limits of their workload. Two ways of sharing pastoral tasks were mentioned. On the one hand, the employment of associate pastors in congregations with multiple pastors was mentioned ("*If I were to be a congregational pastor, I would choose a place that has multiple associate pastors, so the tasks are shared among them.*"), and on the other hand, it was repeatedly mentioned that the solution "*usually comes in the person of a pastor's husband*". As we have seen earlier, this can appear as a relatively strong external pressure for female seminarians, but it also appeared as a wish of their own: "*My dream would be to lead a rural congregation together with a husband.*"

Resolving potential tensions between caring and pastoral responsibilities by performing them in successive life stages also came up as a solution to the work–life problem for women: "*My children will not come back. I can still be a pastor 15 years from now when the kids have left home. So I want to put my heart fully into it when it's time, and I don't think these are necessarily conflicting callings, but maybe God gives them in periods.*"

All in all, we seemed to find rather traditional patterns in personal plans for both men and women. In the men's groups, the discussion sometimes relied unreflectively on traditional patterns, but women also tended to prefer opportunities in personal and private life plans and work–life balance that were compatible with traditional expectations. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that the related discussions in the two groups of women had quite different dynamics: while in one group the participants tended to emphasize external pressures and expectations, in the other group they tended to emphasize their own preferences—which are of course inseparable from internalized expectations.

4.4. Views on Women's Ministry and Opportunities and Difficulties for Women in the Church

In the final part of each of the four focus group discussions, we asked specifically what differences the students saw between male and female pastors in terms of functioning, fulfilling pastoral roles, and how they thought about women's ministry, in general, and women's presence in various leadership positions in particular. This is also important because, as already discussed in the theoretical part of our study, Protestant churches in Hungary are in some respects more conservative in their ways of functioning than the majority of the Western churches. This is also reflected in the opportunities and support for women in leadership roles. There are those who reject women pastors on Biblical grounds, and those who approve women as pastors but do not regard them as acceptable in leadership roles. At this point, it is worth noting that although the official position of the Protestant churches concerned is one of full equality, the relevant passages of the Bible are interpreted in different ways, and these interpretations shape the image of the pastoral vocation. Although these hermeneutical issues were not discussed in the groups, and it is not the task of a sociological study of religion to analyze them, it is important to note that these hermeneutical differences are partly behind the opinions shared in the groups. As will be seen, both types of the rejectionist position were present in the experiences of female students in the focus group discussions, and were present to some extent in the opinions of male students, too.

Previous research has also shown that there can be distinctive differences between women and men in the way they carry out their ministry, with women focusing more on support and relationship building, and men focusing more on liturgical tasks and decision-making (cf., e.g., Sammet 2013; Tervo-Niemelä 2016). Therefore, we approached the topic in the focus groups from the perspective of the perception of the difference between male and female pastors. The first typical reaction to this topic in the focus groups was repeatedly to reject the idea of essential difference, emphasizing that the differences are not between genders but between persons: "*There are differences between any two pastors. And it is for each one individually to recognize and find their task (...) When you have a funeral, you don't look at whether the pastor is a man or a woman.*" (M). However, as the discussions continued, it became clear that, in different ways and to different degrees, differences between men and women in pastoral ministry were seen in all groups. Discussions took very different directions in each group, and the differences were not only along gender lines.

In one of the women's groups, a relatively long discussion developed about the extent to which women pastors should or should not be like male pastors. Several women expressed the view that they were "*often pushed into the male role*", which the women participants considered fundamentally harmful. It was preferred by the group members

that they could remain women as pastors, but they felt that this was not yet taken for granted in the church and that women should stand up for this. One of them said that "*if we don't make the efforts, we lose ourselves*", and others agreed. The conversation then continued:

> "*- It is an identity struggle.*
>
> *- For example, I really like short skirts and short trousers. It's one of those things, it's part of me. (...) I've been like that all my life. Not everyone was happy about it in the theology, but honestly face to face I never got it. I heard it from the back. But there were also teachers who said it was great that someone had finally dared to take it up.*"

By embracing femininity, they meant not only a feminine appearance but also a different way of being a pastor: "*The woman at the head of the congregation represents a completely different direction; the presence of a female pastor in a given community, as its spiritual leader, is completely different from that of a man.*" It also appeared that this would change pastoral ministry in general, (re)focusing on personal connection: "*I think that female pastors can bring back many female attitudes to the role of pastor. Because Jesus also cared for others. Jesus also saw the individual. And there is something in this approach that is closer to our femininity. (...) So, the distortion was that the pastor was present as the leader and builder of the congregation, as I don't know what, and not as a pastor with personal connections.*"

Although the above argument also emphasizes what are traditionally seen as feminine qualities (connection, caring), it has a clear emancipatory content and posits an equal image of the female pastor alongside the male pastor. This emancipatory trait is not present in the other group of women, but the traditional role expectations are. Basically, they contrasted female and male pastors along the lines of emotionality versus practicality. The focus on emotions was framed both as an asset ("*they are more empathetic in this respect, too, they can identify with their congregation aunts more easily and listen to them*") and as a limitation ("*some women, however smart, capable, so to speak, are more exposed to emotional instability at some point*"). And men's 'practicality' was primarily presented as a quality that made them suitable for leadership and higher positions.

The two groups of men also had very different discourses on the question of possible differences between male and female pastors. In the first group, it was formulated that men and women have some basic characteristics that make them suitable for different tasks within the pastoral profession: "*male and female characters are basically two groups that have completely different characteristics. So, for example, I wouldn't want to take on the task of leading a baby-mama circle.*" However, the conversation then moved away from stereotypes considerably, emphasizing, for example, women's abilities in tasks traditionally considered masculine, such as preaching. "*I would have them [those who criticize women's preaching] listen to either some of my fellow students or graduate women pastors preach. Because I think they are unrivalled in that*."

A different dynamic emerged in the second group of men: there were relatively strong views that women were different from men in ways that made them less suited to the ministry. Emotions also played an important role in this argument: "*Women are extremely sentimental, and I don't think they adhere so much to the Scriptures; they are much more carried away by emotions, their own feelings and their own thoughts. A man, on the other hand, knows that it is written, that this is how it must be, period. I think men are rule-followers and are able to detach themselves from their emotions.*"

In this case, the speaker was also concerned about the clarity of the biblical message being conveyed, because of what he perceived to be a more emotional attitude from women. In response to this, a cautious dissent is expressed in the group ("*I don't think the situation is that extreme (...). I think that if the right people, even women, are placed in pastoral positions, the clarity of the gospel does not necessarily have to change.*"), but overall, there were more consenting reactions.

The perceived differences are closely linked to the acceptance of women in the ministry and in church leadership. The experience in women's groups was total rejection by some male pastors on Biblical grounds ("*I had a conversation with my own church when my pastor said, 'What a pity I'm a theologian now, because he can't fellowship with me in ministry. And that I was living* a *sinful life'*."), and also the rejection of women as leaders of the church: "*Even among those who accept the existence of women pastors as men, there is a general view among them that they are not leaders*." It was common knowledge among the female participants that there were still congregations that do not accept women pastors, which also explained the rejection of women as church leaders. However, one of them also expressed that there is a change in this, "*there are now congregations where they are consciously looking for women, looking for a family. So, to have a mother, a pastor mother, it's a very bizarre image, but the congregation needs this too.*" It is worth pointing out that the speaker describes the phrase "pastor mother" as bizarre. The fact that the word 'pastor' still has a bit of 'man' in its meaning may have a role to play in this. This may be particularly noticeable in languages—including Hungarian—where there is no grammatical gender.

Both men's focus groups expressed reservations about women's ministry, but the dynamics of the conversations in the two groups were quite different in this respect. In one group, the criticisms of women's leadership were met with explicitly negative responses from other participants, who disputed the validity of the criticisms. The male student in this group, who expressed a negative opinion, was worried about maintaining the traditional family roles of the female pastor, or more precisely, of the female pastor who leads the congregation: "*Basically, if the pastor is a woman, then she is also the spiritual leader of the family. In my opinion, there is a slight deficiency in this. (...) I think that the man should be the spiritual leader. Because, if he is not the spiritual leader of the family, then the roles can shift a lot. (...) For example, maternal care is not provided by the wife, but the father takes on the parenting role.*" Other participants in the group responded by arguing for the possibility of a caring father role and questioning the incompatibility of spiritual leadership and maternal care. No other viewpoint was raised in this group.

In the other group of men, however, there was a strong attitude of reservation about women's ministry, and such statements tended to be met with agreement, or at least not openly challenged. In this second group of men, there were also arguments based on tradition ("*I support a model that has worked well for centuries in all areas, which confirms that where possible, men should be in leadership positions.*") and on the Bible ("*The Bible teaches us that men are fundamentally suited to this vocation.*"). Both groups of men expressed the view that society and congregations are more open to male than to female pastors. There was a view that placed the church in a wider social context: "*In Hungary, I think there is absolutely such a male-centered structure of thinking*." And there were also some where the reference to acceptance seemed more like an explanation for their own dismissive opinion, as in this case: "*I think classically about it. I think that, if for no other reason, a male pastor tends to be more deserving or better in terms of acceptance of the older generation. He tends to get more respect for some reason*." At this point, it was very noticeable that the participants in the more dismissive male group tried to be careful in their wording, and rather to wrap up the dismissal in some kind of 'common sense' reference, as in this case: "*A man is someone who gives speeches, a man is someone who teaches and leads and does what needs to be done. I'm not saying that women are incapable of this. I'm saying that currently... I'm just searching for the right words. At present, society is not mature enough to accept that a woman can do what a man can do.*" This caution was evident in this group at several points. The reason was probably that they assumed some normative expectation on the part of the (female) moderator of the group, which they thought were contrary to the usual prejudices about women.

Opinions about women's ministry, as this last quote has shown, are closely linked to opinions about women's leadership. 'Leadership ability' emerges in the discussions essentially as the ability to lead congregations. We also asked specifically about how the participants in the interviews perceived the possibility or desirability of women taking on roles in higher church positions. A wide range of opinions and arguments were expressed, which can be grouped into three types. The first type refers to different characteristics of women or men, the second to the family, and the third to discrimination in the Church.

The refusal of women to take up leadership positions in the church was justified by some on the grounds of lack of skills, and the ability to make decisions was raised again: "*I find that, you know, with women, that for some reason they don't have the ability to make decisions. So I am not saying that they are not good, but that they are often in doubt, they cannot decide what to choose.*" *(M).* The following discussion emerged in relation to this opinion:

"*- But sometimes they themselves realize this and therefore don't even attempt it.*

[Q: You mean they don't even apply for these positions?]

- I'm not saying that, because some do—there are plenty of career-obsessed."

This view that women applying for leadership positions are careerists was also expressed by another member of the same group. According to him, the driving force behind this is the desire to prove women's abilities: "*For many, it is a desire to prove themselves or a drive to show that women are capable of this too.*" The speaker sees this not only in the church but in the whole society as a negative phenomenon "*that does not paint a very positive picture in most people's minds*" *(M).*

In one women's group, practicality was mentioned as a quality that makes men more suitable for leadership: "*men are often more practical in this way, and this is very, very useful in a position of, say, bishop, dean, I don't know, archdeacon.* " In the same women's group, the conflict with the traditional family was also raised as an argument, not so much from a practical reconciliation point of view, but rather as a consequence of internalized traditional roles: "*I was just wondering why there is no woman bishop? I realized it's because women are more family-centered, in the sense that they know that their role is to be in the family, not there, to play some larger role in the church or in the diocese, district, or whatever. But I think that's the man's job.*"

Both groups of women, however, suggested that discrimination was definitely a barrier to women's participation in higher church positions. "*It is unspoken, but there is not much opportunity for this. For anyone to be able to take a position as a woman.*" This was also part of the general social context: "*It is set up in our society, or in the particular community that, well, it has to be a man. And maybe a woman is really much, much more qualified, and a lot of times the leaders don't see that (...) The qualifications are there, and a lot of times they will choose a man over a woman (...) I would advocate that in the church, too, just because someone is a woman, that we shouldn't limit them and should give them the opportunity.*" In one group of men, discrimination in the church was partly seen as a generational issue: "*The pastor who becomes a synod member is most often not a novice pastor, but a long-time pastor. And I think there are a lot of people among them who think that women should not become deacons, bishops and so on.*" Related to discriminatory practices, but also posing practical difficulties, are those members of the church who find it unacceptable to have a female boss: "*I think it would be very difficult as a woman, because the dean is leading the diocese and there are a lot of male pastors, even older than us or the same age as us, but I don't know how cooperative they would be in terms of change with a female character, even one with the rank of dean.*" *(F).*

In relation to higher church positions, an interesting question is the extent to which women themselves are ambitious or would accept higher church positions. In our previous research, we have found that women are quite reluctant to take on leadership positions

and always emphasize that it was not their own initiative in cases where they occupy such positions (reference anonymized). In the focus groups with students, those women who would take on a higher position declared that they would do it only if it was necessary ("*I would be in a higher position or would take it if I saw that there was no one better suited than me.*"), and stressed that "*I have no desire to do it.*" This confirms that for a woman it goes against traditional expectations, and is therefore only acceptable in certain cases.

It is also worth touching on another issue related to the perception of women in the clergy, which is the feminization of the church (Nesbitt 1997; Wagner-Rau 2010; Schleifer and Miller 2017). Soon after the last formal-legal barriers to women's entry into the ministry were removed and a greater proportion of women entered theology, the question arose whether the ministry would not become feminized in the same way as some secular professions. This still existing concern may contribute to the persistence or reinforcement of practices that discriminate against women in churches. It is not necessarily fueled by a mistrust of women in the pastoral role or doubts about their suitability, even if these may play a role. Rather, it reflects general fears about a potential decline in the status of the ministry. It is a long-standing experience that professions that are becoming more feminine are being devalued, or that professions that are being devalued are opening up to women in droves. These are often professions that offer less favorable conditions (in terms of money, working conditions, prestige), and therefore repel more mobile male workers who are more confronted with the demands of their responsibilities as family breadwinners (Koncz 2011). Although the motivations for career choices in the pastoral profession are significantly different from those in secular careers, the above mentioned effects impact churches as well. This aspect was also raised in the focus group discussions. In one case in the women's group, the idea of church leadership career plan was met with a response that seemed to articulate concerns about the feminization of the ministry: "*I don't want to take away from your desire to be a congregation leader, it's just that I think it's important (...) that as we demand to be women, it's very important that we have space in our church for men to be men. And, if there are very strong masculine women doing their work, then I do think there are roles where men are needed.*" Another female participant saw this as a source of tension in the church: "*it's interesting to see the tension within, because I had a male theologian friend who was asked if he was afraid of the feminization of the profession.*" This was confirmed by the fact that when the increasing proportion of women among pastors was discussed in one of the men's groups, one participant stated that it "*won't happen [in our church]*" that women will become the majority in the church, to which another participant responded, "*Then I am reassured.*"

In summary, although both traditional role expectations and emancipatory views were voiced regarding women's role in the church, the former were clearly more prevalent in the discourses. Both women and men tended to formulate professional and personal plans and work–life balance strategies that complied with traditional gender-specific expectations.

5. Discussion

The strength of the focus group method is the presentation of the discourse. This is important because in real life, the decisions of women and men about their pastoral careers are made in the context of these discourses. Therefore, it is not only the exploration of the detailed experiences or attitudes of individuals in depth that may be important in this topic, but also the diversity of arguments and attitudes, the discourses that emerge from these, and the dynamics that emerge in the course of these discussions.

Looking at the results presented, it is clear that not only were there significant differences between the male and female groups, but also that the conversations varied greatly between the same-sex groups. One of the characteristics of a focus group is that when a strong opinion emerges in a group, more people join it, so a group norm is quickly estab-

lished, and those who disagree are less likely or more cautious to express it. An opinion may be expressed that seems less accepted or even extreme in the context (for example, the rejection of women's ministry), but the fact that it has been expressed can be liberating for those who also had it in their mind but would not have said it themselves. Or it can also provoke debate among those who disagree with this view. So the focus group discussions can amplify and make more visible certain discourses, opinions, and arguments that shape the decisions of ordinands about their careers in everyday life—but one should be aware of the limitation that not necessarily all existing shades of opinion are represented in every group. It is also important to note another limitation of the research; the focus group, like all qualitative research, cannot show the prevalence of each opinion that emerges. Thus, the results of the focus group research are, in a statistical sense, not generalizable, but they have high validity (Ritchie et al. 2013) and therefore provide a fairly accurate identification of the discourses and emerging opinions among theologians preparing for the ministry on issues related to gender inequality. It also has to be taken into consideration that in all cases the groups were led by women, which may have engendered normative expectations that influenced the men in the groups precisely on gender issues.

Cultural beliefs that discriminate against women (Ridgeway 2011) play a crucial role in the career choices of women pastors. One of the key findings from the focus group discussions is that these beliefs and the resulting gender-specific expectations are very strongly present in the church and in the thinking of the seminarians. Stereotypical beliefs about women and men were expressed to varying degree from group to group, but they seemed to have shaped the professional and personal plans and goals of the students in all groups. Horizontal segregation, which results in a higher proportion of men becoming leading pastors of congregations and women becoming institutional pastors, is reflected to a significant extent in the students' career plans, which are thus likely to contribute to the persistence of this situation in the near future.

Both female and male students see problems in the relationship between work and private life, in the drawing of boundaries, and in the possible negative impact of pastoral work on the family. Their perceptions reflect that pastoral work (especially the work of a pastor leading a congregation) can be "greedy work" (Goldin 2021) that is difficult to reconcile with family and caring responsibilities. It is clear from our results that men's as well as women's private and professional plans are essentially based on the traditional gender order, and therefore women expect greater difficulties in reconciling work and private life (Charlton 1997; Hildenbrand 2013). Prospective women pastors intend to address these problems without radically challenging the norms of their social environment, and they plan their pastoral careers in a way to meet the expectations, without crossing the boundaries that are considered essential, and typically also by fulfilling traditional female roles. Although they have been found to take into account the compatibility with pastoral work in their private life choices (e.g., number of children), they typically try to resolve work–life tensions by making professional choices that are consistent with traditional gender roles. Thus, they more often envision their careers in positions that allow for a better work–life balance, such as associate pastoral positions or non-congregational ministry. These choices may contribute to the perpetuation of the horizontal (Nesbitt 1997; Chang 2005; De Gasquet 2010; Offenberger 2013) and vertical (Finlay 1996; Charlton 1997; Schleifer and Miller 2017; Zurlo 2024) segregation in churches, previously shown by a number of studies. Although female students typically see the difficulties women face in church careers as a given that they seek to adapt to, the focus group interviews also revealed opinions—among both women and men—that reject prescriptive stereotypes about women and the resulting practices that disadvantage women in churches. The strong prevalence of prejudiced attitudes towards women among male students can be a significant obstacle

to these efforts, because it questions their suitability to lead congregations and even their capacity to become pastors.

As a final point in the discussion, it is worth considering the extent to which research findings obtained in the specific Hungarian context can provide valuable lessons for other regions. Some characteristics that distinguish Hungary (primarily) from Western European countries are highlighted in Sections 2.1 and 2.2. These characteristics stem primarily from the changed position of churches after the transition to democracy and from gender and family role perceptions that can be considered rather traditional in a European comparison. However, these are more likely to influence only the extent of disadvantages faced by women: the disadvantages follow a fairly similar pattern in most churches and countries. Thus, although our research results present attitudes and discourses in Hungary, it can provide important lessons in all areas where the formal and legal equality of female pastors is accompanied by deficiencies of genuine equivalence in their participation in church life. These lessons may be particularly important in cases where women's participation in the church is embedded in a more conservative view of gender roles.

6. Conclusions

At the beginning of our research, we formulated two research questions. First, what gender differences or similarities can be observed between theology students' interpretations of vocational plans and goals and their perceptions of work–life balance in the pastoral career; second, what are their perceptions of the different roles and opportunities for women and men in the church, with a special focus on female leaders in congregations and the church.

The analysis of the focus group discussions showed that students tend to have attitudes more in line with the traditional gender order in relation to both research questions. Their professional plans fit into the current situation in the church; women's professional plans are highly characterized by aspirations for institutional pastoral positions, while men's are directed toward the position of a congregational pastor. Women are preparing for starting a family and having children, which will conflict to a lesser or greater extent with their pastoral work, so they take this into account when formulating their professional plans, and this typically implies professional compromises. They are more likely to plan for associate pastoral positions and less likely to be preparing for senior pastoral positions in their congregation, and they justify this both on the basis of their own preferences as well as family commitments. Reservations about women's leadership abilities were expressed in both the men's and women's groups; in the men's groups it emerged as an opinion, while in the women's groups both as an opinion and as an experienced expectation questioning their competences in their environment. There was also the experience in the women's groups that there are not equal opportunities for women and men in the church, especially in terms of higher leadership positions. The election of a female bishop was seen as impossible in both men's and women's groups in the coming years; the most optimistic estimates put it at twenty years, the most pessimistic at fifty years. But even if it is a long way off, the Protestant churches are moving towards greater female empowerment. While the professional choices and work–life-balance strategies of women and men currently preparing to become pastors confirm rather than challenge the existing gender order and the resulting unequal gender relations in the church, there can also be detected an attitude among female students that women pastors need to better embrace their specific feminine characteristics and strengths in ministry and to represent their own perspectives in the church.

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Article

Lifelong Learning Needs of Methodist Preachers: A Quantitative Assessment

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Abstract: Proclamation of the gospel is a perennial practice of congregational leadership demanding responsiveness to issues, trends, and events impacting congregations, their local and regional communities, and the challenges of the world. How do congregational leaders equip themselves for the important and ever-changing task of preaching? Lifelong learning, the fastest-growing and least-resourced aspect of theological education in North America, provides this opportunity. Through a 2024 survey, this quantitative study provides insight into the lifelong learning needs of Methodist preachers, including differences based on gender and race/ethnicity. Time for additional learning is the major perceived obstacle for preachers desiring to improve their craft. Thus, lifelong learning programs must make the case for how the required time and energy will benefit the preacher participating in such programs. Specifically, the activities of reviewing recordings of sermons (both one's own and those of other preachers), receiving constructive feedback on sermons, and realizing the collaborative potential of preaching must be structured in ways that prove the value of these investments for preachers. This data on the lifelong learning needs of Methodist preachers has implications on multiple levels: conceptual, institutional, congregational, and personal.

Keywords: lifelong learning; continuing education; andragogy; Methodism; religious leadership; congregational studies; applied sociology of religion; religious research; preaching

1. Introduction

Proclamation of the gospel is a perennial practice of congregational leadership. Yet, the effective practice of preaching is also constantly responsive to issues, trends, and events impacting congregations, their local and regional communities, and the challenges of the world. Homiletical agility was essential during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alcántara 2020), for example, and that need has not abated. According to a 2023 survey, 80 percent of Protestant churchgoers in the United States agreed that "A pastor must address current issues to be doing their job," and 96 percent of Methodists agreed with this statement (Lifeway Research 2023). The act of preaching provides the most prominent way of addressing current issues. Even in traditions in which engagement with social issues is not a primary concern for preaching, innovations in homiletical methods are highly valued. New media, such as podcasts, social media, and streaming services, are quickly leveraged to proclaim the eternal word of God. Whether through new content, new methods of communication, or both, preachers are constantly challenged to hone their craft.

How do congregational leaders equip themselves for the important and ever-changing task of preaching? A 2022–2023 study by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) shows the importance of preaching for congregational leadership. When asked, "What skills/knowledge/competencies do you rely on most heavily to do your work?," alumni/ae of ATS-member schools working in congregational contexts ranked preaching first by a wide margin (Gin et al. 2025, p. 158). Yet, the study authors observed a misalignment between graduate theological education and the competencies congregational leaders most rely upon in their work (Gin et al. 2025, p. 149). They found that only 5 percent of full-time faculty specialize in homiletics, and preaching ranked seventh on the list of course offerings, far behind Bible, theology, formation, church history, and other areas of study (Gin et al. 2025, p. 164). The study authors suggested, "Lifelong learning is one way that theological schools are addressing gaps between curricula and competencies" (Gin et al. 2025, p. 173). A degree program lasts only a few years; continuing education and formation lasts a lifetime.

Ministry practitioners and graduate school administrators express a growing awareness of the need for lifelong learning. Many leaders and researchers identify lifelong learning as crucial to the future of ministry and theological education (Blier 2023; Blier and Gin 2022; Conde-Frazier 2021, pp. 92–97; Gin and Deasy 2024, 43–45 min.; González 2015, pp. 138–39; Smith 2023, p. 179). It is especially critical for ministry practices, such as preaching: "The call to preach is . . . the call to a lifelong journey of ongoing personal and professional development." (Tucker 2017, p. 201). Preachers are attuned to this need, as evidenced by a clear demand for ongoing educational opportunities. Non-degree (certificate and lifelong learning) enrollment in ATS-member schools grew by 24% between 2023 and 2024—the only significant area of growth and "the most promising enrollment trend" within theological education (Meinzer 2024).

Lifelong learning is the fastest-growing and least-resourced aspect of theological education in North America. Programs of lifelong learning for ministry are under-resourced (Blier 2022). Recognizing lifelong learning as one of five primary sectors providing care for clergy, researchers from a Duke University study observed that "there is very little dialogue occurring between the academic community and other providers," creating an untapped opportunity for collaboration and support (Austin and Comeau 2022, p. 60). The Duke study determined that lifelong learning programs need "research-informed tangible guidelines and practical frameworks" to flourish (Austin and Comeau 2022, p. 72). The present study provides quantitative data to inform the development of such guidelines and frameworks.

This article contributes to the development of lifelong learning for preachers by presenting the results of a survey of preachers. This quantitative study was conducted in the spring of 2024 within the Greater New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conferences of The United Methodist Church. This survey was designed to assess preachers' interest in skill development and learning opportunities, collaboration with listeners, and obstacles to improved preaching. This data on the lifelong learning needs of Methodist preachers has implications on multiple levels: conceptual, institutional, congregational, and personal.

2. Materials and Methods

The United Methodist Church (UMC) entrusts the task of preaching to laity and clergy alike, resulting in an elaborate list of official categories. The UMC ordains both permanent (vocational) deacons and elders (presbyters). Deacons and elders are commissioned for a trial period of two or more years before ordination. Licensed local pastors function as presbyters in specific locations on a year-to-year basis. All three categories of clergy are

appointed by a bishop to their specific ministry settings. Lay preachers (including certified lay preachers and supply pastors) are "assigned" by the bishop rather than "appointed." Formal education in the practice of preaching varies widely among and within all categories of United Methodist preachers.

Survey data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed to United Methodist preachers in the Greater New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conferences in the spring of 2024. The questionnaire was distributed via direct email invitations to ordained, commissioned, or licensed pasters under bishop appointment, lay preachers assigned to regional congregations, and ordained or commissioned deacons. Additionally, as a regular reminder, a link to the questionnaire was included in a weekly email newsletter shared with all conference members. The survey remained open during March and April 2024.

Of the 203 total responses submitted, 38 individuals either failed to answer any questions or answered only the background questions presented on the first page of the survey. These responses were omitted from the sample prior to analysis. Thus, a total of $n = 165$ usable responses were collected. The response rate can be calculated in two ways, comparing the sample size (n) to the target population (N). The total number of clergy members ($N = 1453$) in the conferences studied includes retired clergy and those not under appointment but does not include data about lay preachers assigned to congregations, resulting in a response rate of 11.4%. This N differs from the number of invitational emails ($N = 712$) sent to active preachers, lay and clergy, resulting in a response rate of 23.2%. While the smaller N is more accurate for calculating the response rate among active preachers, no demographic information is available for this subset. Demographic information is only available for clergy ($N = 1453$), who comprise 80.6% of the sample. Because respondents were self-selected (non-random), and because some sample characteristics were found to differ significantly from the parent population of United Methodist preachers in the conferences studied, statistically significant findings should be interpreted with caution.

For all Tables in this article, valid counts and percentages are reported, and characteristic percentages do not always total 100 percent due to rounding errors. For gender identity, the category "Declined/Unknown/Undefined" does not include true missing values. Bar charts were visually examined to assess the assumption of similarly shaped distributions across groups; while no substantial distributional differences were observed, both medians and means were provided.

3. Results

3.1. Sample Demographics

The sample closely reflected conference demographics (see Table 1), with most respondents identifying as male and White. Although the distribution of respondents across racial/ethnic categories was not found to differ significantly from the population, female preachers were overrepresented among study participants.[1]

All but four respondents reported that they are not conference staff (see Table 2) and, when asked to indicate their role as a conference member, over three-quarters reported that they are either an elder appointed to a local congregation or a licensed local pastor. Additionally, most participants have eight or more years of preaching experience, are the primary preacher in their ministry setting, and preach primarily in person. Only 2.4% of respondents, compared to an estimated 4% of active preachers in the two conferences, preach regularly in a language other than English.

Table 1. Sample and conference demographics.

Characteristic	Sample		Conference	
	n	%	N	%
Gender Identity				
Male	83	53.5	940	64.7
Female	67	43.2	495	34.1
Non-Binary	1	0.6	--	--
Declined/Unknown/Undefined	4	2.6	18	1.2
Racial/Ethnic Identity				
White	110	71.4	1019	72.0
Black or African American	21	13.6	149	10.5
Asian or Asian American	14	9.1	149	10.5
Hispanic or Latino/a	5	3.2	68	4.8
American Indian or Alaska Native	--	--	1	0.1
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	--	--	--	--
Self-Identify/Other	4	2.6	30	2.1

Table 2. Respondent background characteristics.

Characteristic	n	%
Conference Staff		
No	159	97.5
Yes	2	1.2
Other	2	1.2
Description of Role		
Elder appointed to a local congregation	76	46.1
Licensed local pastor	49	29.7
Certified lay minister	10	6.1
Lay preacher	10	6.1
Supply pastor	6	3.6
Commissioned or ordained deacon appointed to a local congregation	4	2.4
Retired clergy	2	1.2
Elder appointed in extension ministry	1	0.6
Commissioned or ordained deacon appointed beyond the local church	1	0.6
Other role	6	3.6
Years of Preaching Experience		
0–3 Years	7	4.3
4–7 Years	28	17.1
8–11 Years	25	15.2
12–15 Years	32	19.5
16+ Years	72	43.9
Primary Preaching Setting		
Within a church building to congregation members	152	92.1
Within an online preaching environment (streaming or recorded)	1	0.6
Other setting	12	7.3
Primary Preaching Language		
English	161	97.6
Spanish	1	0.6
Korean	1	0.6
Other language	2	1.2
Extent of Preaching Responsibility		
Primary preacher	133	80.6
Occasional preacher	14	8.5
One of two or more preachers in equal rotation	13	7.9
Other	5	3.0

3.2. Study Findings

As shown in Figure 1, among the preaching skills listed in the questionnaire, respondents averaged the greatest interest in improving their ability to bring the Word of God alive in their preaching context (M = 4.19). Likewise, most indicated that they are "very" or "extremely interested" in improving their ability to the following: address current events and congregational concerns (70.8%); feel inspired about and reflect upon their own preaching (67.1%); deliver sermons that reach more diverse audiences (67.7%); utilize resources representing diverse perspectives to inform their preaching (62.7%); encourage listener feedback (61.2%); and prepare sermons efficiently (61.6%). In contrast, participants averaged the least interest in improving their ability to preach in settings outside of their congregation (M = 3.20). About half of respondents reported that they are only "somewhat" or less interested in improving their preaching skills in the remaining areas listed, such as preaching a wider variety of sermon genres, online preaching, and sermon planning and delivery. Curiously, only 50% reported they are very or extremely interested in "Listening to and watching sermons . . . to develop skills and strategies," contrasting with 67% who expressed the same level of interest in "Inspiration and reflection on my own preaching."[2]

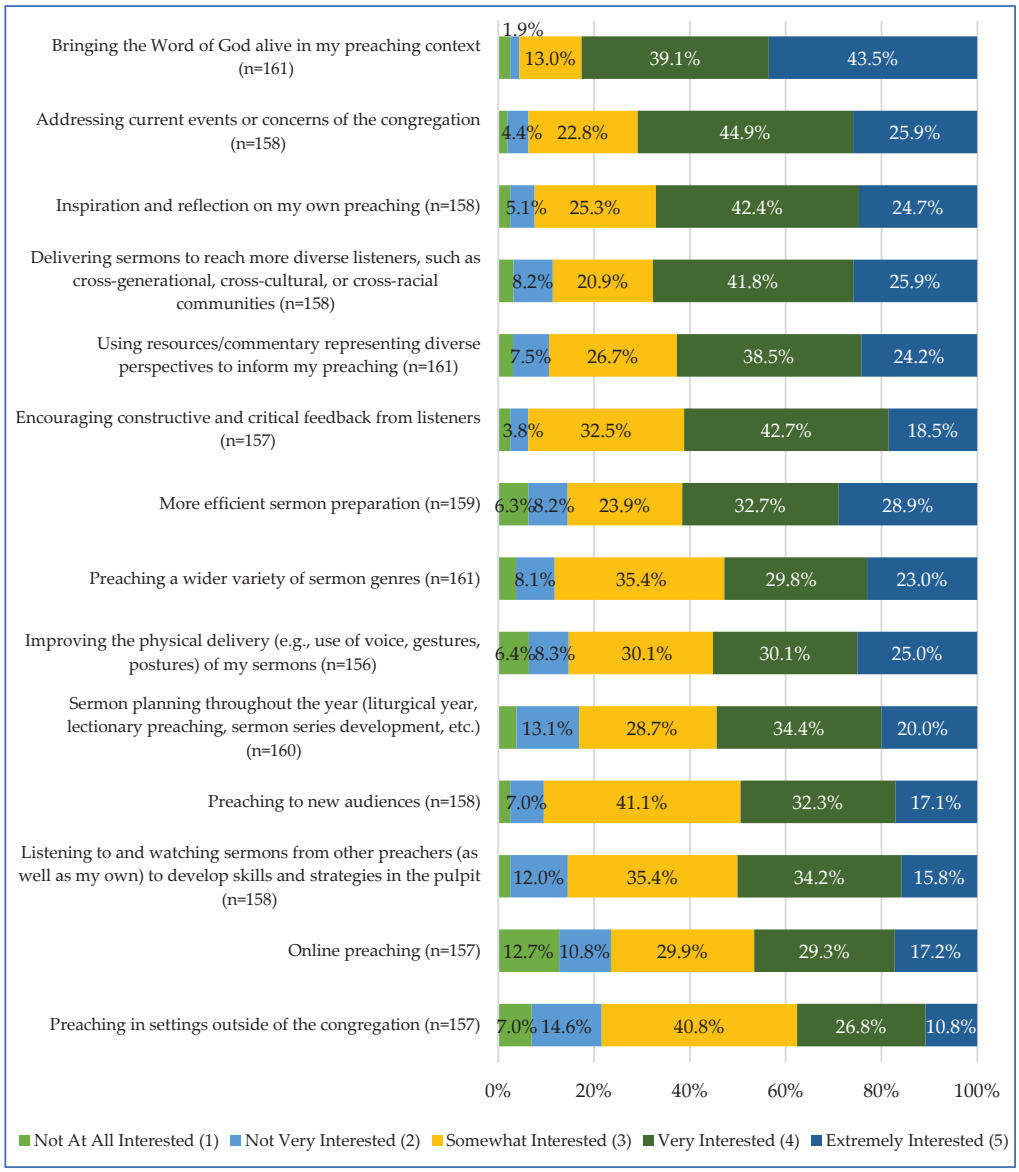

Figure 1. Interest in preaching skill development.

Results from a series of Mann–Whitney U tests (see Table 3) revealed one significant gender difference and a multitude of significant racial/ethnic differences on items measuring interest in preaching skill development. Specifically, female preachers expressed significantly less interest in improving their ability to preach to new audiences compared to males ($Z = 2.08$, $p < 0.05$), while White preachers expressed significantly less interest in developing or improving nearly all skills listed in this portion of the questionnaire compared to preachers of color ($p < 0.05$, respectively).

Table 3. Significant Mann–Whitney U test results for demographic comparisons on interest in preaching skill development measures.

Measure and Groups	Descriptives				Test Results		
	n	Md	Mean	Mean Rank	U	Z	*p*
Preaching to new audiences							
Female	64	3.00	3.36	64.43	3012.50	2.08	0.037
Male	79	4.00	3.68	78.13			
Improving the physical delivery of my sermons							
White	103	3.00	3.41	66.27	2856.0	3.14	0.002
Another Identity	42	4.00	4.02	89.50			
Preaching a wider variety of sermon genres							
White	107	3.00	3.42	67.18	3191.00	3.87	<0.001
Another Identity	43	4.00	4.14	96.21			
Bringing the Word of God alive in my preaching context							
White	106	4.00	4.06	70.56	2855.50	2.33	0.020
Another Identity	44	5.00	4.43	87.40			
Sermon planning throughout the year							
White	106	3.00	3.39	69.32	2881.00	2.63	0.009
Another Identity	43	4.00	3.86	89.00			
Preaching in settings outside the congregation							
White	105	3.00	3.07	68.47	2680.50	2.42	0.015
Another Identity	41	3.00	3.54	86.38			
More efficient sermon preparation							
White	105	4.00	3.46	65.71	3180.00	4.05	<0.001
Another Identity	43	4.00	4.28	95.95			
Using resources/commentary representing diverse perspectives to inform my preaching							
White	107	4.00	3.51	67.19	3190.00	3.89	<0.001
Another Identity	43	4.00	4.19	96.19			
Addressing current events of concerns of the congregation							
White	106	4.00	3.80	69.37	2663.50	2.26	0.024
Another Identity	41	4.00	4.15	85.96			

Table 3. *Cont.*

Measure and Groups	Descriptives			Test Results			
	n	Md	Mean	Mean Rank	U	Z	*p*
Inspiration and reflection on my own preaching							
White	106	4.00	3.69	68.60	2851.00	2.82	0.005
Another Identity	42	4.00	4.17	89.38			
Online preaching							
White	106	3.00	3.09	68.74	2731.00	2.50	0.013
Another Identity	41	4.00	3.68	87.61			
Delivering sermons to reach more diverse listeners							
White	106	4.00	3.72	68.62	2743.00	2.61	0.009
Another Identity	41	4.00	4.15	87.90			
Listening to and watching sermons from other preachers							
White	105	3.00	3.29	68.06	3144.00	3.93	<0.001
Another Identity	43	4.00	4.00	95.12			
Encouraging constructive and critical feedback from listeners							
White	106	4.00	3.58	67.39	2874.00	3.23	<0.001
Another Identity	41	4.00	4.10	91.10			

Regarding listener feedback (see Figure 2), most participants reported that they "somewhat" or "very frequently" solicit feedback on their preaching from their spouse or family members (70.7%) and members of their congregation (55.6%). Additionally, nearly half reported soliciting feedback at least "somewhat" frequently from colleagues or peers (49.5%) and close friends (43.7%), and about a third indicated receiving frequent feedback from a designated person or committee within their congregation (33.6%) and their mentor(s) (30.1%). On the other hand, as shown in Figure 3, respondents overwhelmingly reported that they seek feedback from formal evaluative groups (92.9%), preaching instructors (96.2%), and preaching coaches (95.5%) either infrequently or not at all.[3]

As shown in Table 4, testing revealed that, compared to males, female preachers more frequently seek feedback from their colleagues and peers ($Z = -2.53$, $p < 0.05$), while preachers of color were found to solicit more frequent feedback from both mentors ($Z = 2.25$, $p < 0.05$) and formal evaluative groups ($Z = 2.33$, $p < 0.05$) compared to their White counterparts.

When asked to indicate the frequency with which they would like to receive feedback on their preaching from the same sources (see Figure 3), respondents provided the greatest share of "somewhat" or "very frequently" ratings for members of their congregation (65.2%) and the smallest share for formal evaluative groups outside of the congregation (16.9%) (see Figure 3, next page). Notably, compared to their current feedback ratings, participants averaged higher desired feedback ratings for all categories apart from their spouse and family members (current $M = 3.80$; desired $M = 3.17$). On average, the greatest disparities between current and desired feedback were observed for mentors (current $M = 2.54$; desired $M = 3.37$), preaching instructors ($M = 1.40$; desired $M = 2.62$), and preaching coaches ($M = 1.37$; desired $M = 2.89$).

As shown in Table 5, test results showed that, compared to males, female preachers desire more frequent feedback from both their spouse or family members ($Z = 2.06$, $p < 0.05$) and preaching instructors ($Z = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, results revealed that White preachers desire significantly less frequent feedback from mentors compared to preachers of color ($Z = 2.23$, $p < 0.05$).

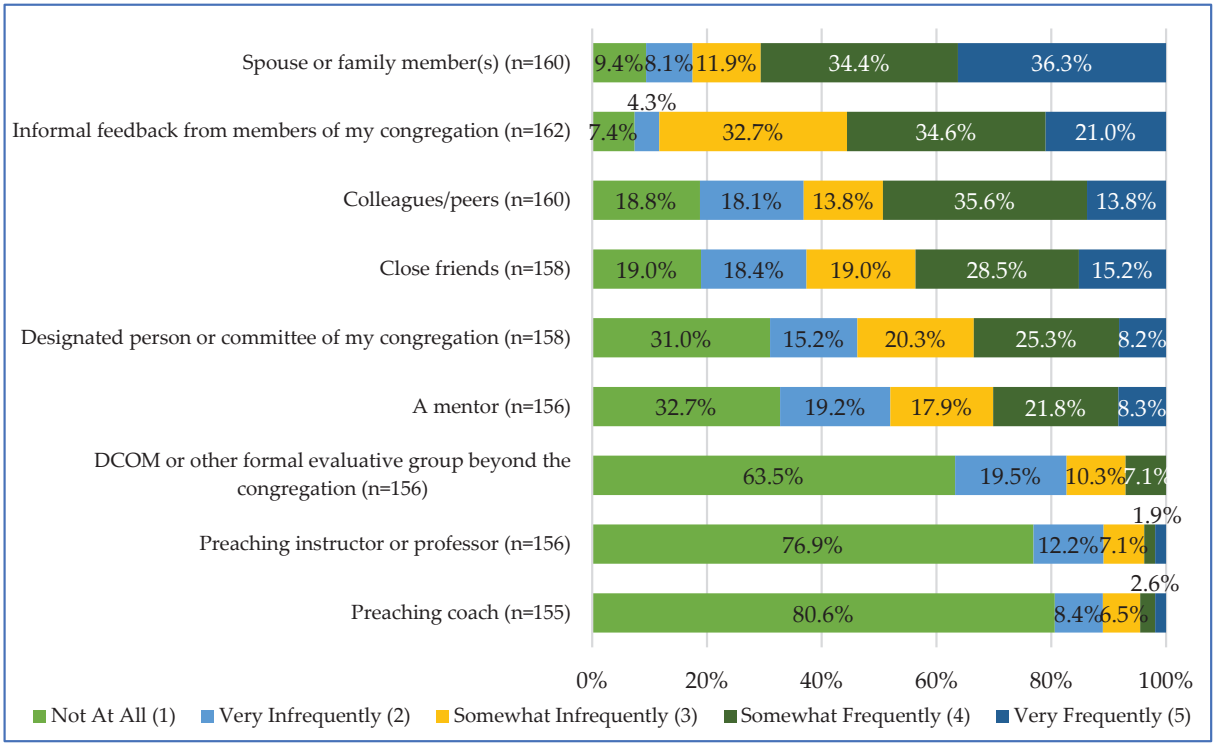

Figure 2. Current frequency of preaching feedback.

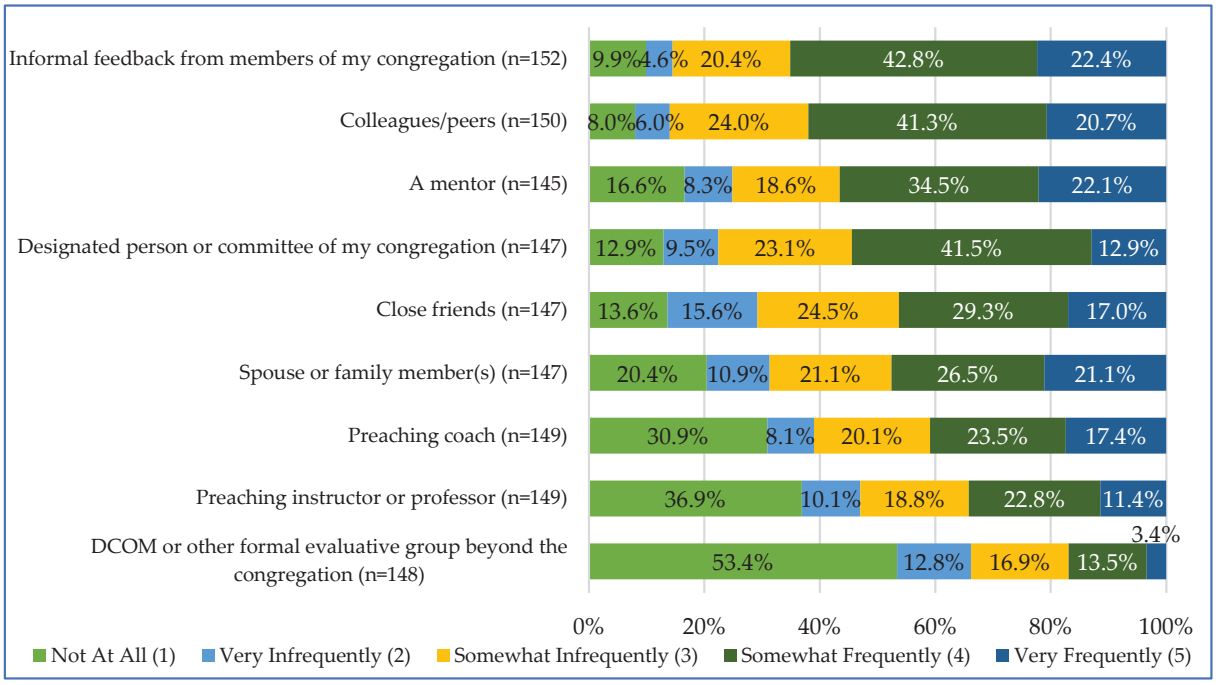

Figure 3. Desired frequency of preaching feedback.

As shown in Figure 4, relatively few respondents reported employing collaborative methods in their preaching preparation, with 20–30% of preachers indicating that they hold a regular study group with laypersons and/or ministry colleagues and engage in online discussions with colleagues, and fewer reporting engagement in classroom instruction (18.2%) and one-on-one mentoring or coaching sessions (16.9%).

Table 4. Significant Mann–Whitney U test results for demographic comparisons on current frequency of preaching feedback measures.

Measure and Groups	Descriptives			Test Results			
	n	Md	Mean	Mean Rank	U	Z	*p*
Colleagues/peers							
Female	64	4.00	3.36	82.62	1976.50	2.53	0.011
Male	81	3.00	2.79	65.40			
A mentor							
White	104	2.00	2.31	68.24	2627.00	2.25	0.025
Another Identity	41	3.00	2.88	85.07			
DCOM or other formal evaluative group beyond the congregation							
White	104	1.00	1.45	69.10	2642.00	2.33	0.020
Another Identity	42	1.00	1.90	84.40			

Table 5. Significant Mann–Whitney U test results for demographic comparisons on desired frequency of preaching feedback measures.

Measure and Groups	Descriptives			Test Results			
	n	Md	Mean	Mean Rank	U	Z	*p*
Spouse or family member(s)							
Female	61	3.00	2.89	60.53	2712.50	2.06	0.039
Male	74	4.00	3.39	74.16			
Preaching instructor or professor							
Female	61	2.00	2.38	61.66	2765.50	2.01	0.045
Male	76	3.00	2.86	74.89			
A mentor							
White	96	3.00	3.21	64.22	2427.00	2.23	0.026
Another Identity	41	4.00	3.68	80.20			

Participants overwhelmingly reported that most of the potential obstacles listed in the questionnaire pose little to no challenge to working toward improved preaching practices (see Figure 5). Specifically, while most indicated that their time "sometimes" or more often presents an obstacle to working toward improvements (76.0%), over two-thirds view their skillset, motivation, congregation's preference for preaching style, and a lack of both interesting/useful resources and access to such materials as "rarely" if at all posing an obstacle to improved preaching practices.[4]

As shown in Table 6, only one significant racial/ethnic difference was observed among demographic comparisons on the obstacle items, with test results revealing that White preachers view their congregation's preference for preaching style as less of an obstacle to working toward improvements compared to preachers of color ($Z = 2.60$, $p < 0.01$).

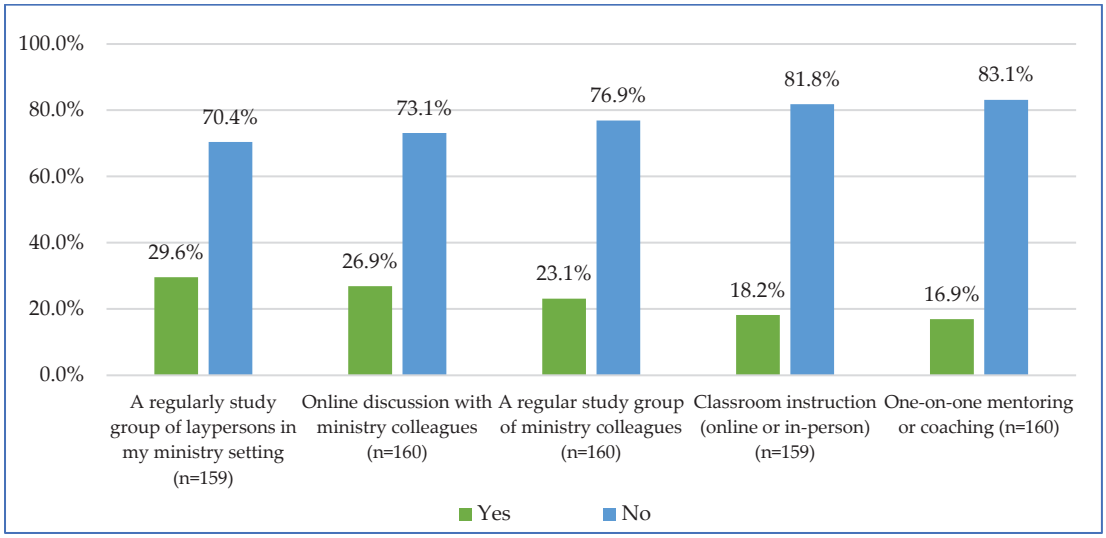

Figure 4. Collaborative methods employed in preaching preparation.

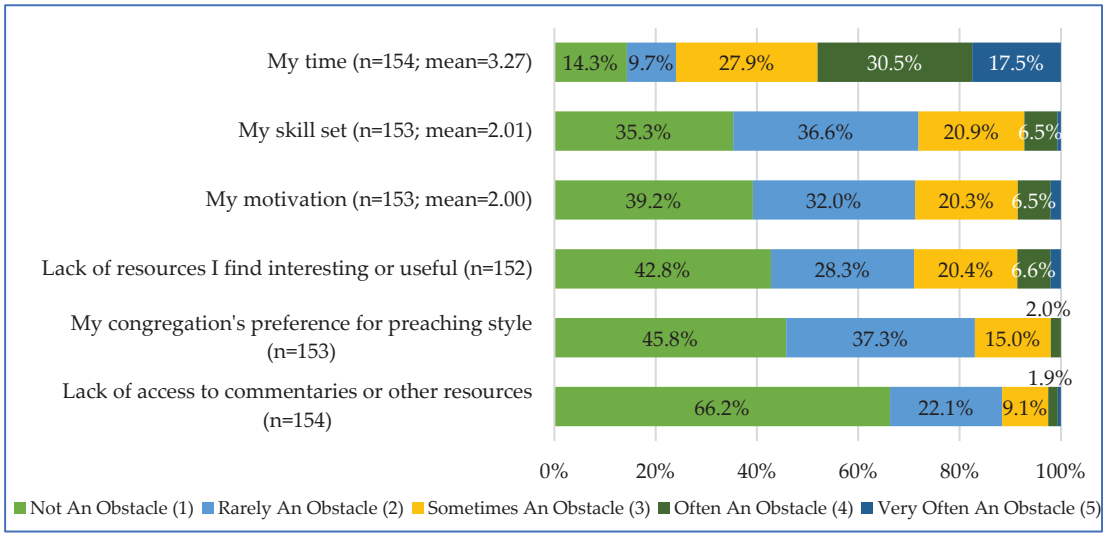

Figure 5. Obstacles to improved preaching.

Table 6. Significant Mann–Whitney U test results for demographic comparisons on obstacles to improved preaching measures.

Measure and Groups	Descriptives			Test Results			
	n	Md	Mean	Mean Rank	U	Z	*p*
My congregation's preference for preaching style							
White	107	1.00	1.61	70.11	2877.00	2.60	0.009
Another Identity	43	2.00	2.02	89.91			

4. Discussion

4.1. Results

The Methodist preachers participating in this survey are generally open to developing their preaching skills through both personal and collaborative means. They are responsive to feedback on their preaching practices from both listeners and colleagues and are interested in taking advantage of future learning opportunities.

Specifically, respondents are most interested in improving their preaching skills by bringing the word of God alive in their preaching context, addressing current events and congregational concerns in their sermons, and through self-reflection on their preaching style and content. Conversely, respondents are least interested in preaching to new audiences and in new settings, reflecting on others' sermons (or their own) to improve their own preaching, and online sermon delivery.

It is disconcerting that half of the survey respondents seem reluctant to learn from their own sermons and those of others. The difference in interest in "Inspiration and reflection on my own preaching" (67%) contrasted with "Listening to and watching sermons . . . to develop skills and strategies" (50%) suggests that preachers may be inspired but tired, lacking the time and energy to develop the skills needed to improve their craft. When asked to rate the extent to which various factors pose obstacles to developing improved preaching practices, time constraints received the highest average rating, with few indicating that other factors such as their skill set, motivation, and available resources present challenges to such efforts.

Receiving constructive feedback is an important part of growing as a preacher. Preachers surveyed most frequently solicit feedback from close family and friends, congregation members, and colleagues, with far fewer reporting consultations with designated committees, mentors, and instructors or coaches. When asked the frequency with which they would like to receive more constructive feedback from various groups, most indicate that they would prefer "somewhat" or more frequent feedback from mentors and designated committees, as well as their colleagues and congregation members.

Collaboration among preachers and between preachers and listeners is also a significant avenue for growth in the art of preaching. Lifelong learning draws on life experiences and peer learning, and working together is the most direct way to activate this learning and to lighten the load. There is a case to be made for collaboration in the task of preaching (Hannan 2021). Notably, fewer than a third of respondents employ one or more collaborative methods in their preaching preparation, with the most common being study groups with laity and colleagues, and online discussions with peers.

Formal statistical testing revealed numerous significant or marginally significant differences based on respondent demographic characteristics. Regarding gender differences, female preachers express less interest in preaching to new audiences and greater interest in addressing current events or congregational concerns through sermons; more frequently solicit feedback from colleagues and mentors, and desire more frequent feedback from family members, peaching coaches, and instructors; express less interest in becoming a trained peer facilitator; and are more likely to view their skill set and a lack of access to resources as obstacles to improved preaching.

Regarding racial/ethnic differences, preachers of color express greater interest in improving their preaching skills across all areas; more frequently solicit feedback from mentors and formal evaluative groups, and similarly desire more frequent feedback from these sources; are more likely to view congregational preferences as an obstacle to improved preaching; and are less likely to view their motivation as a challenge. Notably, only two respondents preach primarily in languages other than English.

Lastly, with regard to differences based on years spent preaching, those with fewer years of experience are generally more interested in using diverse perspectives to inform their preaching; more frequently solicit feedback from a peaching coach, and desire more frequent feedback from nearly all sources; express greater interest in a hybrid certificate program offering; and are more likely to view their skill set and a lack of access to commentaries or resources as obstacles to improved preaching. Although most observed differences

were found to be weak to moderate in size, these findings may nonetheless warrant further consideration when designing lifelong learning opportunities for preachers.

4.2. Interpretation

Lifelong learning is an important though undervalued part of a preacher's professional development. Although lifelong learning is essential to ongoing development, the practice of ministry lacks a professional association to standardize continuing education or oversee licensing. Clergy have no equivalent to the American Association of Nurse Practitioners or the American Psychological Association or other national guilds. Ordination and licensing standards vary from church to church, denomination to denomination, as do expectations for continued learning and development. Nevertheless, preachers benefit tremendously when they pursue lifelong learning.

Amid the current state of rapid social change within the United States and Canada, graduate theological schools are increasingly expected to provide structured lifelong learning opportunities to hone ongoing, effective ministerial practice. ATS claims 270 graduate schools of theology as members in the United States and Canada. For the first time, in June 2020, ATS adopted an accrediting standard pertaining to lifelong learning: "The school demonstrates an understanding of learning and formation as lifetime pursuits by helping students develop motivations, skills, and practices for lifelong learning" (ATS 2020, §3.5). Furthermore, seminary graduates are requesting such opportunities. Recent data from ATS's "Mapping the Workforce of ATS Grads" survey show lifelong learning as a significant area of growth in theological education (Gin 2024; Gin and Deasy 2024). A graduate degree program, no matter how robust, simply cannot offer a "complete" education for ministry practitioners.

For more than a century, the preparation of mainline Protestant clergy for careers in ministry has adhered to a "preservice professional education" model (Reber and Roberts 2010, p. 44). This model assumes that ministry is a profession, parallel with other helping professions, and that professional formation and education for ministry occur prior to entering the profession. For example, this educational paradigm is presumed in a landmark study of clergy education sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Daniel Aleshire, former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, lauded the first volume of The Preparation for the Professions Series, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (Foster et al. 2006), as "[t]he most important study of North American theological education in this century" (Aleshire 2010, p. 512). The Carnegie Series described "three apprenticeships of professional education": normative, cognitive, and practical—or, more colloquially, the being, knowing, and doing of professional formation (Foster et al. 2006, p. 5). In the preservice model, such professional formation occurs within a degree program. Thus, the team of researchers led by Charles R. Foster addressed neither the kind of learning that might occur in venues other than graduate theological education, such as non-degree programs offered by judicatories or bible institutes, nor the kind of learning that might happen or might need to happen after clergies graduate from seminary. Likewise, lifelong learning is mentioned on only a few of the 800+ pages of the encyclopedic *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity* (Werner et al. 2010). Yet, the preservice model of education cannot by itself provide the integration necessary for effective preaching.

Integration occurs only by practicing in the profession. In his "Introduction" to *Educating Clergy*, William M. Sullivan noted that the ability to (re)integrate knowledge with practice "provides the great challenge" for professional schools, including seminaries (Foster et al. 2006, p. 5). Thus, nearly every helping profession—medicine, nursing, social work, teaching, law—requires practitioners to continue their education beyond a

professional degree. The most effective curricula for such continued learning go beyond simply updating one's knowledge base, instead providing opportunities for professionals to exercise problem solving—often, through community-building learning opportunities—thus integrating continuing education and practice (Reber and Roberts 2010, pp. 44–46). The preservice model of education is necessarily incomplete without a form of ongoing education that can accompany the practitioner throughout a career of evolving expectations and changing contexts.

The lifelong learning needs of preachers are distinct from the education they might gain in a degree program. Specifically, the means and ends of preservice education differ from that of continuing education. Adult education, or andragogy, differs from classical pedagogy in its participative planning, design, and evaluation (Knowles 1970, p. 54). Adults learn best when they can shape their learning experiences to find answers to questions that arise in practice, when they are supported and challenged in a community of learners guided by a skilled facilitator, and when they are involved in assessing the outcomes and determining what to learn next (Reber and Roberts 2010, p. 86).

Succinctly, andragogy is based on the following six assumptions: (1) just-in-time learning, based on need; (2) self-directed participants who are agents of their own learning; (3) participants' life experiences as a resource for learning; (4) a readiness to apply learning to real-life situations; (5) practical application to tasks and problems; and (6) internal motivation (St. Clair 2024, pp. 7–8). Where graduate theological education focuses on formation (Foster et al. 2006), lifelong learning for practitioners involves a more dialogical method designed for wrestling with complex problems and refining professional practice (Reber and Roberts 2010, p. 83). Thus, lifelong learning for ministry is a form of just-in-time learning in which the learner (practitioner) sets the agenda and determines their goals.

What does andragogy look like for preachers? D. Bruce Roberts reported on a persuasive example of peer group learning offered through the Methodist Educational Leave Society (Reber and Roberts 2010, pp. 86–89). This program in Alabama operated from 1985 to 1996 and included 130 Methodist preachers who met in groups ten to fifteen days per year, ranging from three to six years. Self-selected groups of 6–8 preachers were assigned a facilitator, who assisted them in deciding on learning goals, developing a learning plan, applying their learning, and evaluating their progress on a continued basis. The features of andragogy are clearly present in this program's design, from self-direction by participants to practical application to tasks and problems. Furthermore, peer learning was a centerpiece of this program's design, in which each group became a community of learners teaching each other. Roberts and his co-investigator, Robert E. Reber, also identified the important role of the facilitator in guiding the process and managing group dynamics (Reber and Roberts 2010, pp. 87–88). Based on interviews and surveys, they reported that "there is little doubt that the peer group process improved preaching in general as well as helped create new energy in pastoral leadership" (Reber and Roberts 2010, p. 88). Not only did preachers learn about preaching, but they also became better leaders in their congregations.

A ten-year initiative of Vanderbilt Divinity School to strengthen the quality of preaching provides another example. Established in 2013 with a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., the program in homiletic peer-coaching was motivated by the fact "that preachers seldom experience ongoing mentoring or coaching after their seminary years" (McClure and Utley 2023, p. 1). The program equipped and trained preachers based on a collaborative peer-learning model. Such a program is rare. "There are few situations where preachers can reflect on their lives and practices as preachers with one another in groups that are well-coached with an eye toward vocational formation, renewal, change, and accountability" (McClure and Utley 2023, p. 1). This depiction of need fits precisely the distinctive qualities of adult learning described above.

4.3. Implications

How can congregational leaders tasked with the responsibility of preaching be nurtured and equipped for the lifelong learning they seek? The rich insights yielded by the quantitative data on the lifelong learning needs of Methodist preachers have implications on multiple levels: conceptual, institutional, congregational, and personal.

On a conceptual level, lifelong learning has meaning professionally and vocationally. Most (if not all) other helping professions have professional guilds that provide opportunity and accountability for ongoing professional development. The profession of ministry is exceptional. There are no common standards of care, competence, or excellence for congregational leaders or preachers, in particular. What counts as compelling, responsible, or effective preaching varies from sect to sect, denomination to denomination, culture to culture, and even congregation to congregation. Yet, preachers are practitioners of a helping profession who are in positions of public prominence. Continuous formation through lifelong learning is integral to maintaining a sense of pastoral identity and being fully equipped as a congregational leader. Thus, preachers have a professional obligation to renew and improve their craft on an ongoing basis despite and because of the contextually specific expectations they face.

As persons called by God and affirmed by the church through representative ministry, preachers also have a vocation obligation to themselves, God, and the church to grow continually in their life of faith and their proclamation of the gospel. Wesleyan theology emphasizes the importance of growth in sanctification, expecting continual growth toward Christian maturity. Without such growth in the person of the preacher, a Wesleyan understanding of grace cannot be effectively proclaimed with integrity. Preachers must find ways to attend to their own spiritual growth as they preach the importance of the same to others. Lifelong learning about preaching and the practice of preaching in itself can become spiritual disciplines conducive to professional and vocational growth. The practice of preaching, the activities of preparing a sermon, and the lifelong learning necessary to improve as a preacher can all become means of grace. How are preachers' lifelong learning and vocational growth supported or hindered?

On an institutional level, there are many potential and actual supports and barriers to lifelong learning participation by preachers, including denominational policies, resource allocation, and other structural factors. Judicatory leaders, ministry educators, and program administrators should be attuned to practical considerations such as dedicating protected time for ongoing education, offering financial support for continuing formation, and designing inclusive, multilingual learning programs that reflect the diverse needs of preachers, particularly non-English-speaking pastors. Multivocational or bivocational preachers and those who are employed in ministries outside the judicatory's purview face additional constraints of time and resources. Hospital chaplains, for example, often must take vacation days to attend denominationally required workshops. Bivocational pastors who work a secular job face similar constraints, receiving no "protected time" for professional development as a preacher, despite judicatory efforts to the contrary. Denominations and judicatories must invest in their preachers if they expect their preachers to invest in themselves.

Ecumenical partnerships can be leveraged to provide resources and learning opportunities for preachers in multiple languages—if differences in denominational culture and theological perspectives do not become insurmountable barriers. For example, how can *las predicadoras* (Spanish-speaking female preachers) in the UMC find collaborative learning opportunities in partnership with *los predicadores* (Spanish-speaking male preachers) in conservative denominations that do not allow women to preach? Gender identity and sexual orientation are often barriers to partnership. LGBTQIA+ preachers must be vigilant

when attempting to partner with outside organizations and churches, many of which are hostile and threatening to their existence. These barriers require deep work to overcome, and preachers in marginalized groups should not be expected to do this work on behalf of the church. Thus, on a practical level, some potential ecumenical partnerships in lifelong learning for preaching are severely limited or prevented altogether.

On the congregational level, there is great potential for cultivating an ethos of lifelong learning. The congregation is the immediate context in which preaching is determined effective and faithful. What matters to the congregation has direct relevance to the preacher, regardless of their level of agreement. The sermon cannot effectively communicate the gospel if the listeners and preacher are not finding common ground to address common concerns. Potentially, there is much to be learned within the preacher's immediate context, and this realization should provide motivation for learning. Yet, it often takes an outside perspective to see the water in which one swims. Lifelong learning often requires collaboration with others.

The ongoing educational development and spiritual growth of the preacher requires fostering a culture of mutual growth among preachers and between preachers and their listeners. However, survey respondents reported low levels of engagement in collaborative learning methods. This reality is contrary to the collaborative means of learning promoted in contemporary pedagogical paradigms in homiletics. Whether inspired by the image of "the roundtable pulpit" (McClure 1995), "place-centered preaching pedagogy" (Clark 2024), "the people's sermon" (Hannan 2021), "Communal Prophetic Proclamation" (Schade 2019, p. 120), or the need for "improvisational teaching" (Alcántara 2020, p. 13), the idea of collaboration before, during, and after the sermon event is very much on the minds of modern-day homileticians. Barriers to collaboration may include a perceived lack of opportunity, time required to coordinate scheduling, navigating interpersonal and group dynamics, geographical distance, and a general sense of isolation among clergy.

Congregations can help preachers overcome barriers to collaborative learning by encouraging, resourcing, and valuing collaborative learning opportunities for their preachers. Local churches and regional networks can support regular mentoring sessions and peer learning cohorts, for example, by offering time and compensation for professional development and being open to what the preacher may learn from colleagues who preach in other contexts. Local churches can also encourage participation in digital or hybrid learning platforms to facilitate networking across geographic and demographic boundaries. Congregations can also publicly affirm ongoing learning as a vital part of their leader's development.

On the personal level, the individual preacher must be ready and willing to learn. From the perspective of andragogy, the preacher as an adult learner must be able to identify a need, take initiative for learning how to meet that need, draw on their experience as a source of knowledge and wisdom, connect their learning to real-life situations, apply their learning to tasks and problems, and evaluate their success in order to determine what they need to learn next. The process of lifelong learning requires internal motivation and external support. As an adult learner, the preacher must be able to identify their next-level preaching goal, whatever that may mean for them in their context, and seek the necessary resources to learn how to achieve that goal. Identifying a need and setting an appropriate learning goal are critical steps in the process of lifelong learning. These steps can be facilitated through collaboration with both colleagues and parishioners, as the preacher seeks to improve their craft of preaching. Tools for learning include peer mentoring, collaborative goal setting, and self-directed learning communities. Finally, the preacher's motivation and initiative may be tempered by the very real constraints of time and money, as indicated by survey respondents.

4.4. Limitations and Future Avenues of Research

This survey was limited in scope to two geographic conferences of one Protestant denomination. Additional research would need to be conducted to provide comparative data showing differences based on geographic region, theological commitments, denominational traditions, and prior educational experiences of preachers. The absence of random selection in the sampling process further limits the generalizability of findings from this study and underscores the need to interpret the results with caution. Although the sample was originally collected for evaluative rather than predictive purposes and was found to closely match combined conference demographics, respondents may over- or underrepresent unmeasured attitudinal and behavioral characteristics that influence preaching perceptions and practices. For this reason, future quantitative research seeking to draw broader generalizations should employ established probability sampling methods while collecting additional data relevant to the practice of preaching to ensure sample representativeness and reduce the likelihood of spurious or erroneous results.

Additionally, this study was limited to quantitative survey data, making it difficult to gain an understanding of the complex, lived experiences of preachers—particularly in relation to the prominent obstacle of time constraints and preachers' hesitancy to engage in collaborative methods of sermon preparation and learning. Complementing this quantitative study with qualitative research methods could yield rich, contextualized insights into how and why time scarcity affects preachers' professional development, for example. A future avenue of research with this survey population includes soliciting feedback from preaching cohorts and engaging in focus groups.

5. Conclusions

This quantitative assessment provides insight into the lifelong learning needs of Methodist preachers, though many questions remain. Overall findings provide insight into the needs of clergy as they aim to take their preaching to their perceived "next level" of practice in style or content. Respondents recognize a need for more support as well as express interest in pursuing continued learning opportunities, time allowing. This is a significant caveat: respondents identify time constraints as the biggest obstacle to continued learning.

Lifelong learning programs for preachers will need to make the case for how the investment of time and energy in preaching will benefit the preacher. The hard work of reviewing recordings of sermons (both one's own and those of other preachers) to develop skills may be a hard sell. Likewise, the trust required to receive feedback on sermons must be built into programs providing such structured learning opportunities. Given the lukewarm responses expressed on this topic in the survey, it is likely that preachers generally lack a structured way of receiving effective feedback. Likewise, the collaborative potential of preaching seems unrealized among the preachers surveyed. Lifelong learning programs may need to cultivate an ethos of collaboration and prove the value of investing the time for collaboration for adult learners to recognize and embrace the value of this aspect of the preaching task.

Newer preachers, female preachers, and non-White preachers all express significantly more interest in improving their preaching support in the ways identified in this survey. As significant differences in demographic groups were discovered in this process, it is critical that educational program content and instructors reflect the demographics expressing interest in continued learning opportunities through visuals, examples/stories in content, and in instructor identities. Furthermore, the needs of preachers who primarily preach in languages other than English were not well represented in the survey sample. To learn about this subpopulation's lifelong learning needs will require a survey conducted in their

primary language, and lifelong learning opportunities will likewise need to be offered in languages other than English.

Shaping lifelong learning programming around these findings will help bolster successful curricular design, program outreach, and enrollment in educational offerings. Future research directions based on these results encourage exploration of some of the common challenges and pathways toward strengthening preacher impact that are identified from this research such as the following: improved preaching support, determining the approach one takes to managing preaching identity with congregational preferences, the role of preaching mentors, and the role of supportive individuals more broadly across a preacher's career, the social and professional capital that a preacher may have or need as it impacts preaching style, preaching confidence, and preaching identity.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ATS	Association of Theological Schools
DCOM	District Committee on Ministry
MDPI	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute
UMC	The United Methodist Church

Notes

1 In Table 1, the sample proportions of males and females differ significantly from the corresponding population proportion based on Z-test for equality of proportions [$p < 0.05$].
2 In Figure 1, due to limited space, "Not At All Interested" category percentages of 5.0% or less are not labeled.
3 In Figure 2, due to limited space, "Very Frequently" category percentages of 5.0% or less are not labeled.
4 In Figure 5, due to limited space, "Very Often An Obstacle" category percentages of 5.0% or less are not labeled.

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