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Wesley D. Cohoon

Texas Woman's University, wcohoon@twu.edu

Jessica Smartt Gullion

Texas Woman's University, jgullion@twu.edu

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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

“Maybe I’m Just Too Damaged”: Revisiting Clergy Reasons for Leaving the Profession

Wesley Cohoon and Jessica Gullion

Abstract: *Vocational ministry is a unique profession for several reasons, not the least of which is the needed “calling from God” for Evangelical ministers. After someone receives this call, they begin their formal seminary training, which usually includes a 90-credit-hour master’s degree. Despite the sense of divine calling, time, money, and commitment, the number of people who leave vocational ministry is alarming. In leaving the profession, ministers experience guilt and a sense of moral failing, in addition to the waste of time and money spent accruing the correct credentials in seminary. In this study, we conducted in-depth interviews of former ministers to learn why they left the profession. While framed by the participants as individual failings, we found that vocational ministers face significant structural constraints that make it difficult to succeed. The findings from this study suggest that aspiring ministers be aware of the challenges of vocational ministry, and churches and seminaries implement structural changes to improve clergy longevity.*

Vocational ministry is unique compared to most other professions. Most ministers say there was a divine calling for them to do this work. They attend seminary to study the Bible in-depth and believe it is God’s wish that they do so. This is a significant investment of time and money. On average, seminary tuition and fees can reach upwards of \$30,000 per year, plus living expenses. Depending on the degree, it can take between two to four years to complete a master’s degree and four to six years to complete a doctorate.

This is a professional degree, with the expectation upon graduation that one would become clergy and find a job in ministry leadership. Yet, most ministers do not remain in the profession for long. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, ninety percent of clergy do not remain

in the profession long enough to retire from it, with only about half staying in more than five years, and 1,500 clergy leave the profession every month.¹

Our overarching research question seemed simple: After obtaining so much professional education, which required a significant time and financial commitment, why do ministers leave the clergy? We conducted in-depth interviews with former clergy to find out.

Literature Review

The Uniqueness of Vocational Ministry

A change of career for clergy is not like that of other professions. A call (from God) to vocational ministry is considered essential for ministry preparation and education.² Because of the sacred nature of entering ministry, those who leave the profession often report feeling shame and stigma. The decision to leave could be viewed as a decision to disobey God. Ministers are confronted with a lack of personal/professional boundaries, differences in interpretations of doctrine, an ethic of sacrifice, and financial difficulties. This leads to a high level of burnout.

Ministers experience a lack of boundaries between their professional and personal lives.³ Part of the boundary challenge is made more difficult by congregants and their expectations—ministers are expected to always be available. One study found that clergy experience worse burnout than counselors.⁴ Counselors are trained to create built-in boundaries, they work with people in limited contexts, and a counselor can increase their income with a higher caseload. The same is not true for ministers. Counselors conduct their sessions in an office, while clergy may offer pastoral care or counseling in congregants' homes, places of business, or elsewhere. If a Licensed Professional Counselor sees a client at the grocery store, there is no expectation of a mini-counseling session; in fact, they are not supposed to acknowledge the client at all unless the client invites them to do so. However, when a minister sees a congregant at the grocery store,

¹ Fuller Institute, George Barna, and Pastoral Care, Inc. "Why Pastors Leave the Ministry," *Shepherd's Watchmen* 2019. Accessed online, May 19, 2021, from <https://shepherdswatchmen.com/browse-all-posts/why-pastors-leave-the-ministry>.

² Shaun Joynt and Yolanda Dryer, "Exodus of Clergy: A Practical Theological Grounded Theory Exploration of Hartfield Training Centre Trained Pastors," *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 69, 1 (2013): 7.

³ Greg Scott and Rachel Lovell, "The Rural Pastors Initiative: Addressing Isolation and Burnout in Rural Ministry," *Pastoral Psychology* 64 (2015): 90.

⁴ Christopher J. Adams, Holly Hough, Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, Jia Yao, and Melanie Kolkin, "Clergy Burnout: A Comparison Study with Other Helping Professions," *Pastoral Psychology* 64 (2017): 168.

congregants could use that opportunity to receive pastoral care from the minister. Clergy are continuously at work, and deal with people in intense interpersonal situations.

When a person claims they are a member of a particular profession, others can interpret that as the person accepting the values of that specific profession.⁵ When religious communities hire a minister, they expect that minister to represent and maintain that community's beliefs. A change in conviction could result in loss of employment. Ministers might feel pressure to hide their true feelings and struggles, become discouraged by measurable results, and interpret conflict within the religious community as a personal attack.⁶ One study that examined ministerial satisfaction and depression found that pastors reported being lonely, yet they were frequently surrounded by others.⁷ The researchers concluded that the isolation was not because of a lack of social contact, but instead, the ministers did not have relationships where they could be themselves and vulnerable.

An essential part of the job includes compassion and self-denial.⁸ Christian clergy's belief system does not allow ministers to take credit for success. Rather, they are to strive for humility, they believe that God gets credit for all things, and that the minister is only a vessel of God. The work of evangelizing and unconditionally loving everyone are two impossible and never-ending tasks. Role expectation pressures can cause ministers to become overwhelmed and leave vocational ministry.⁹

Many vocational ministers struggle with their role expectations regarding compensation. If someone in a secular field does a good job, they could receive a higher wage. Things are different for clergy because when

⁵ Hans van Crombrugge and Ruben Debusschere, "Vocation-Oriented Professional Education: Between Cultivating a Talent and Hearing the Call," *Christian Higher Education* 16, 1-2 (2017): 42.

⁶ Lucie Bardiau-Huys, "Sustaining Pastoral Ministry: Denominations Must Awesome Their Responsibilities," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 34, 1 (2014): 68.

⁷ Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, Bruce Smith, Ashley Eisenberg, Sara Legrand, Christopher Adams, and Amber Wilk, "The Glory of God is a Human Being Fully Alive: Predictors of Positive Versus Negative Mental Health Among Clergy," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, 4 (2015): 717.

⁸ Cameron Lee and Aaron Rosales, "Self-Regard in Pastoral Ministry: Self-Compassion versus Self-Criticism in a Sample of United Methodist Clergy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 48, 1 (2020): 29.

⁹ R. S. Beebe, "Predicting Burnout, Conflict Management Style, and Turnover Among Clergy," *Journal of Career Assessment* 15, 2 (2007): 259.

they ask for a raise, others can question the clergy's motivation and morality. Many clergy work multiple jobs—a term referred to as bi-vocational—or raise outside funds for their salary. While denominational leaders claim that the number of bi-vocational pastors is on the rise, the number of bi-vocational ministers has only risen based on sex, marital status, and location.¹⁰ Financial stress and low wages are common themes for clergy. Financial stress is widespread among clergy and can result in depression.¹¹

Ministry Burnout and Fatigue

Clergy experience a staggering amount of burnout and compassion fatigue. One study determined that 65.4 percent of ministers were either bordering on or experiencing burnout.¹² Another survey indicated that 39 percent of clergy feel drained by their ministry roles, and 33 percent reported feeling fatigued and irritated daily.¹³ Additional research showed that 51 percent of clergy indicated that they have considered leaving the ministry.¹⁴

The literature is relatively consistent in defining and separating burnout and compassion fatigue. One main difference between the two is that compassion fatigue can appear suddenly, while burnout usually emerges gradually.¹⁵ Since burnout surfaces over a period, it is not uncommon for burned-out clergy to still show dedication to their vocational ministry. One study found that satisfaction in ministry was different than burnout.¹⁶ They discovered that ministers can still feel contentment with the work they were doing but at the same time feel

¹⁰ Samuel L. Perry and Cyrus Schleifer, "Are Bi-Vocational Clergy Becoming the New Normal? An Analysis of the Current Population Survey, 1996-2017," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, 2 (2019): 523.

¹¹ Proeschold-Bell, et al., "The Glory of God is a Human Being Fully Alive," 715.

¹² Joseph D. Visker, Taylor Rider, and Anastasia Humphers-Ginther, "Ministry-Related Burnout and Stress Coping Mechanisms Among Assemblies of God-Ordained Clergy in Minnesota," *Journal of Religious Health* 56 (2017): 954.

¹³ Leslie J. Francis, Andrew Village, Mandy Robbins, and Keith Wulff, "Work-Related Psychological Health Among Clergy Serving in the Presbyterian Church (USA): Testing the Idea of Balanced Affect," *Review of Religious Research* 53 (2011): 15.

¹⁴ Kelvin J. Randall "Examining Thoughts About Leaving the Ministry Among Anglican Clergy in England and Wales," *Practical Theology* 6, 2 (2013): 184.

¹⁵ Scott and Lovell, "The Rural Pastors Initiative," 73.

¹⁶ Maureen H. Miner, Martin Dowson, and Sam Sterland, "Ministry Orientation and Ministry Outcomes: Evaluation of a New Multidimensional Model of Clergy Burnout and Job Satisfaction," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 83 (2010), 182.

burned out. It is also discovered that satisfaction in ministry decreases at first but grows with tenure.¹⁷ Like other professions, clergy experience ups and downs, but the difference is that the congregants dehumanize the clergy and expect them always to be up.

Pastoral ministry contributes to burnout. Ministers interact with others primarily through caring for their grief and trauma.¹⁸ Grief does not have to center around death; it includes grieving a failed marriage, termination from a job, or unfulfilled expectations. Congregants expect the minister to handle another person's grief without it emotionally or mentally affecting the minister.

Clergy also experienced burnout because of the business aspects of ministry. For example, a study on small church pastors found that managing volunteers and dealing with the consumer mindset of church members led to burnout.¹⁹ Ministers reported that congregants would find another church if their current minister was not giving them what they wanted.²⁰ The consumer mindset of congregants puts pressure on vocational ministers to appease people while staying true to the minister's convictions. Clergy may have to lose their job to maintain their beliefs, or they could give into the congregants' wishes and sacrifice the minister's core values.

Ministers deal with people's ultimate values in life and meaning-making, which adds pressure and can lead to feelings of hyper-responsibility. When this happens, clergy can feel at fault for those under their ministerial watch. Self-blame, disengagement, venting, distraction, and denial correlate with higher burnout.²¹ The personal responsibility and stress felt by clergy negatively affects multiple areas of their lives. One study showed that 61 percent of ministers reported that vocational ministry is stressful and hurts their physical health.²²

While the literature adequately covers the uniqueness of vocational ministry as a profession and clergy burnout, there is much less research on

¹⁷ Charles W. Mueller and Elaine McDuff, "Clergy-Congregation Mismatches and Clergy Job Satisfaction," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, 2 (2004): 266.

¹⁸ Scott and Lovell, "The Rural Pastors Initiative," 92.

¹⁹ Debra White Smith, "Ministerial Training on Consumer Culture and Volunteer Management May Prevent Burnout for Small-Church Clergy," *Pastoral Psychology* 69 (2020): 238.

²⁰ White Smith, "Ministerial Training," 236.

²¹ Visker et al. "Ministry-Related Burnout and Stress Coping Mechanisms," 958.

²² Benjamin Webb, Melissa Bopp, Meghan Baruth, and Jane Peterson, "Health Effects of a Religious Vocation: Perspectives from Christian and Jewish Clergy," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 70, 4 (2016): 268.

what happens to ex-clergy. The silence is probably due to many reasons, and perhaps the main one is that ex-clergy are harder to find. Researchers can contact denominations or other religious groups to receive lists of current clergy members, but those previously in vocational ministry could be harder to locate. For example, one study sent out 183 surveys to clergy from Lutheran churches in the Mid-Atlantic region.²³ In their research, 75 percent of participants intended to stay in their current job for the next 18 months. This study of clergy burnout is limited because they target current clergy, who are happy or plan to stay in their position. There is a need to research ministers who have burned out and left the vocational ministry.

A problem we have also seen in the literature is that the research emphasizes surface-level preventative measures to keep people in vocational ministry. For example, researchers conducted a study to see if clergy burnout was related to working nights or early in the morning.²⁴ The purpose of another study was to show that education can help pastors from becoming burned-out.²⁵ While these preventive measures can be helpful, the studies are not addressing the structural problems inherent in the profession. Rather, authors put the onus of change on the clergy to do something different to avoid burnout. The underlying assumption is that the people need to stay in ministry. Perhaps additional research exploring the oppressive nature of religious organizations could help identify and address foundational and systematic problems.

In our research, we wanted to revisit the question of why people with seminary degrees leave their ministries to identify those underlying structures. Through in-depth, narrative interviews with former ministers, we hoped to catch their personal stories and add to the depth of knowledge on this subject.

Because of the nature of this project, we feel it is important to acknowledge our standpoints relative to this work. Wesley Cohoon has worked in full-time professional ministry for the past eleven years. He attended seminary and has a Doctor of Ministry degree. Most of his contacts and acquaintances are also Evangelical Christians, and we recruited

²³ Jodi M. Jacobson, Ann Rothschild, Fatima Mirza, and Monique Shapiro, "Risk for Burnout and Compassion Fatigue and Potential for Compassion Satisfaction Among Clergy: Implications for Social Work and Religious Organizations," *Journal of Social Service Research* 39 (2013): 459.

²⁴ Leslie J. Francis, Andrew Village, and John Payne, "Introducing the Francis Owl-Lark Indices (FOLI): Assessing the Implications of Diurnal Activity Patterns for Clergy Work-Related Psychological Health," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* (2021): 11.

²⁵ White Smith, "Ministerial Training," 239.

participants from this pool. Cohoon has a good rapport with the participants and conducted all of the interviews. Jessica Gullion considers herself spiritual but not religious. She was raised in the Catholic Church, which she no longer attends. Thus, we had both an insider and outsider perspective on this issue.

Methods and Data

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine participants. All the participants were male—seven were white, and two were Asian. They range from their mid-30s to their early-60s, with a median age of 46. The lack of diversity of participants can be understood by the recruitment process, theological beliefs of Evangelicals, and ministry practices by churches in the U.S. Table 1 details the participants' educational background. Every participant had earned a bachelor's degree, and every participant except one had at least a master's degree.

First, we recruited the participants based on Cohoon's years in vocational ministry and professional contacts with people who were also in ministry. We were specifically interested in people who had graduated from a seminary, which eliminated ministers and other church leaders who took a different path.

Second, many Evangelical churches do not ordain women, and they advocate for a theological position that only men can be in ministry leadership positions. Evangelical churches generally use verses in the Bible like 1 Timothy 2:12 or 1 Corinthians 14:35, which state that women are not to speak in church or be in authority above a man. Even churches that ordain women are still highly patriarchal. For example, the Church of England started ordaining women in 1994, but as of 2015, women only make up 23 percent of their ordained clergy.²⁶ Therefore, there is a lack of diversity regarding gender in this study.

There is also a lack of racial diversity in the study. The participants are primarily white because churches in America usually segregate based on racial lines. For example, a survey of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America found that they had 1.2 percent of multiracial churches in their denomination in 1993, and by 2012 that denomination only had 3.6 percent of multiracial churches.²⁷ While we attempted to incorporate people with

²⁶ Annie-Marie Greene and Mandy Robbins, "The Cost of a Calling? Clergywomen and Work in the Church of England," *Gender, Work, and Organizations* 22, 4 (2015): 406.

²⁷ Kevin D. Dougherty, Gerardo Marti, and Brandon C. Martinez, "Congregational Diversity and Attendance in A Mainline Protestant Denomination," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, 4 (2015): 675.

more diverse backgrounds into the study, most people who fit the recruitment group are white males.

Protocols for this study were approved by the Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board. After participants received the initial recruitment letter and expressed interest in this study, we sent them an electronic informed consent through a secured e-signature software service. The participants did not receive any incentives for the research. One person who declined to participate in the study sent an email back stating, "*I wasn't sure I wanted to open those wounds.*" We respected his decision and offered an empathetic response. We suspect he was not the only person we contacted who did not participate in the study because of the emotional pain associated with leaving the full-time ministry.

The interviews were held from May through August of 2021. Eight of the interviews occurred through Zoom, and we interviewed one participant at a local restaurant and brewery at the participant's request. The interviews occurred in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex in North Texas. Most of the participants were educated by evangelical seminaries in that area. The longest interview was 2 hours and 24 minutes, while the shortest interview lasted 47 minutes. The median interview time was 65 minutes. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed with the transcribe feature on Microsoft Office 365. After transcription, we listened to the audio and corrected any mistakes. Then we permanently deleted all audio and video recordings.

We reviewed the transcribed interviews and identified themes from the participants' replies. The overarching themes emerged, and then we further divided the responses into subthemes. We continued organizing, reorganizing, and dividing themes which allowed verification, testing, clarity, and consistency. Our guiding influences for analyzing the interviews are hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social theory. Our hermeneutic approach was to empathize with and read the person's experience not only as data, but as stories of people's lives. We employ a critical orientation by recognizing how power structures and systems contributed to the participants leaving the vocational ministry.

Findings and Discussion

We identified three major themes within the data, along with several sub-themes. The first theme focused on the difficulties and uniqueness of vocational ministry, which included limited career opportunities and the exploitative nature of ministry. The second theme dealt with how respondents evaluate ministry success and themselves. The final theme that

emerged from the interviews was the participants' resiliency and response to adversity. Despite experiencing setbacks and disappointment, the respondents expressed respect for vocational ministry vocation, expanded their views of religious calling to non-traditional and secular paths, and experienced professional success in other fields.

Difficulties with Vocational Ministry

All the participants discussed the limited career opportunities that are associated with vocational ministry. Participant Two became so desperate that he started writing in his cover letter that he would initially work for free as a trial to his employment, but he still did not receive any callbacks. Participant Eight reported that he left the full-time ministry because he had a hard time finding a job, and Participant Nine said that the Dallas area was saturated. At least four participants reported that they were never called back for any interviews. Participant Seven felt like his 90 plus hour master's degree did not make him competitive in the job market, and he would need a Ph.D. to be considered a serious job candidate. The lack of opportunities surprised the participants, and Participant Two specifically selected his seminary because of its reputation and the opportunity to get a ministry position.

Participants who did find a job in ministry experienced numerous employment challenges. The primary one was that these participants lost their jobs for reasons that they would not in other professions. Participant Two, who never received a job in vocational ministry, reported that racism might have played a part,

So multiple places after that I applied. I didn't get a job; it was very hard. And I don't want to say that it's my skin color and other things. I mean, it may play into some decisions when they say the magic word "fit," as in "you're not a good fit."

A few candidates lost out on opportunities because their beliefs did not align with their church or organization. Participant Five described his termination from a church, along with several other church staff, occurred because their ideas about the church's future direction differed from the senior pastor's. In another situation, Participant One lost his ministry position because of a disagreement with the senior pastor after the senior pastor acted inappropriately towards the participant's wife and abused his position of power. Participant Four lost his job as a pastor on two different occasions because he was experiencing problems in his marriages.

Financial struggles also limited career opportunities. Participant Four, who lost his job related to his marital problems, had to borrow money, take odd jobs, and relied on a friend who gave him some money. He has a Ph.D. but could not find employment for an extended period because his education is limited to ministry. The requirements to be a professor at a seminary or Bible college can be similar to what a church requires of a pastor, so he could not use his education or experience there. He described this period of his life as “an emotional, desperate kind of time.”

A few participants discussed the low pay associated with vocational ministry. Two participants reported that the income in ministry would negatively impact the lives of their families. Participant Six stated that finances had been a contributor to him not pursuing vocational ministry. He recognizes that going into ministry would involve taking a low wage, which would impact the standard of life of his wife and daughter. Many participants reported challenges of paying back their educational debt, and Participant Eight stated that people are “nuts” if they take out loans for seminary because it adds pressure to an already stressful job. Participant Two who spent six years in seminary earning a 120-hour master’s degree shared feelings of discouragement of paying back his educational debt even though he could not find ministry employment.

Participant One stated that he was “lucky” that he never had a full-time ministry job. He recalled a seminary professor who encouraged his students to raise their financial support or be bi-vocational, so they were not dependent solely on the church for income. Participant Seven recalled that he had to close his ministry because they could not afford to stay open because they were ministering to a socioeconomic disadvantaged population.

Several participants sought additional training and education after seminary to prepare them for ministry. Participant Eight pursued a chaplain residency, and he reported that the things he learned in that residency still help him professionally and personally. Participant Four took 12 hours of graduate management courses. He realized that there are many management issues that he needed training on as a pastor, and he did not feel like he received enough of that training in seminary. Participant Nine echoed the need for business courses, and he reported that he frequently struggled with the fiscal and management aspects of ministry.

While the participants felt like their seminary experiences lacked practical application, many talked about how rigorous and challenging it was. A couple of participants discussed that they were lonely in seminary, and Participant One reported that he frequently cried himself to sleep

during his first year of seminary. Participant Five said that he used to be arrogant, but "the Lord broke me in seminary."

The difficulty of the seminary experience was magnified by Participant Two who tried to get good grades, work, and be a family member. He reported that some professors said that students were sinning if they did not get the best grades in the class. Meanwhile, other professors reported that students were sinning if they were married and getting an A in class. Seminary for many of these participants was not only academically rigorous, but they also experienced moral tension. These participants had the everyday challenge of graduate school with the added layer that their subject matter represented a higher, ultimate purpose. Therefore, to fail or to succeed was embedded in their views of good and evil.

The second subtheme regarding the participants' challenging considerations with vocational ministry is how they were exploited. While the participants did not overtly state that they were exploited, they told stories and provided examples of being taken advantage of and emotionally abused. They may not be overtly aware of the exploitation, and some may even deny it, but that exploitation was clear in our analysis of the data. The nature of ministry and the expectation that the minister must sacrifice themselves would lead many participants to see that abuse as just part of being in ministry.

Participant Three discussed that people projected an authority on him because he was a seminary student. Participant 1 reported feeling a similar experience in that his seminary training separated him from his support group at church. His church group unknowingly shut him down when he had struggles or doubts because they projected their theology onto him by assuming studying at seminary was without struggle and was pure joy.

Out of the nine participants, eight of them were married at some point. Every married participant discussed the difficulties of vocational ministry either on their marriage or their wife at the time. Participant Four was previously married twice, and he mentioned marital problems due to the interruptions and expectations to work off-hours. Two participants stopped seeking ministry positions because the emotional stress became overwhelming on their wives. Participant Six reported that he came home to his wife crying several days in a row, and Participant One stated that he was interviewing for church positions on the phone while his wife was sobbing into the pillow in the next room.

Participant Nine stated that his wife did not "appreciate being a pastor's wife." In addition to those struggles, he also reported that

vocational ministry made it difficult for them to have quality time together. Participant Seven stated that he is interested in reentering ministry, but his wife does not want him to do it. He described the experience by saying,

It's never simultaneous calling between (his wife) and myself. It's always me hearing it and thinking 'I could really do something here.' And then asking her, and she's like, 'I didn't hear anything.' So, it really would need to be a calling for both of us to go back into ministry. It's really gonna have to be God showing up and doing the work in (his wife's) heart. So, she got burned through the whole thing most of the time.

The last three participants all mentioned how ministry impacted their marriages, and they all had similar ways of handling the stressors and setting boundaries early. Two of these participants reported that mentors emphasized how vital their marriages were, and all of them said that their marriages took priority over their ministry. For example, Participant Five stated that his wife and he set up an agreement where she was completely supportive but completely uninvolved in his ministry. Participant Eight sat down with his wife before taking his ministry position because the church had an expectation that she would be an active volunteer. Participant Two credited his wife as a constant source of encouragement, and he reported that he and his wife have cried and prayed together many times. Participant Two finally concluded, "What kind of a minister would I be if I lost my family but can preach really well? And I realized that having a God-fearing, Christ-following family is itself a great ministry."

The participants also discussed how the expectations of their roles negatively impacted their families. Participant One reported that he has two adult children—one is an atheist and the other is not involved in a church. Participant Five shared his beliefs that ministers are "under complete spiritual warfare," and a minister's family will take an "immediate hit." Participant Four reported that his father was a pastor, but he grew up naïve about the challenges associated with vocational ministry. He said his parents tried to protect him and his siblings from the negative aspects of the profession. Participant Four was surprised when he told his parents that he felt called to ministry and wanted to go to seminary. He recalled the story,

I expected there might be maybe, not confetti and streamers and balloons, but you know, it'd be a little party of a thing.

And my dad looked at my mom. My mom looked at my dad, and he said, "Well, we're happy for you. But I would say if you think there's another way for you to be obedient to God and happy, you should choose that path." I just remember the impression that made on me 'cause it wasn't what I expected. And yet, of course, after years of vocational ministry, it's like, "Oh yeah, I get it now, you know, I understand his response."

The participants shared stories about how the church is supposed to help and support families. At the same time, vocational ministry is extremely difficult and exploitative for the families of those who do it.

Participant Nine reported an uncertainty if he ever "completely healed" from the burnout. At the time of the interview, this participant had not been in vocational ministry for over five and a half years. The lingering impact that this participant feels connects to an expectation of sacrifice. Participant Six emphasized brokenness and being crushed, which he defined as positive things that God does to people in ministry and their families. Participant Four shared his sacrificial attitude that the cost to him is insignificant, as long as he is a blessing and ministering to someone else. Participant One reported that he stayed in positions too long and continued to sacrifice himself and his family because he felt an obligation to do so.

A lack of boundaries was another area of exploitation that the participants experienced. One common way this occurred was through people assuming that vocational ministry is not real work. Participant Five shared that someone called him and told him to get out of bed. Participant Five told the person, "And I said, "Well, I'm actually out of bed. I mean, I actually get up and do stuff. I mean, it might be prayer and other things, but I'm up."

Related to the idea that the minister does not work is that the minister should always be available to the congregant. Participant Four shared that people are demanding of the minister more than other professions. He said,

The expectation is, 'You should be available to me, whenever I need.' There's a lot of people that think, 'Hey, we pay you 45 grand a year. And 24/7 is when I need you.' Really? I have since come to peace with all that. But every now and then, I'm a little mouthy and say, 'You know what? Your doctor that makes half a million. If he's on vacation, you are not seeing him. I don't care if you died. He's not even coming to your

funeral.' I mean, I make a joke about that. But really, so that's probably been the other thing. It's just really how people think. It's kind of their view of the world.

Evaluation of Ministry and Self

Another theme that emerged from the interviews had to do with how the participants viewed ministry and themselves. Many of them share the same ideas concerning the organizational aspects of ministry. There was an anti-business and anti-logic view of ministry. For example, Participant Two contrasted doing ministry "by faith," which he contrasted to planning and budgeting. Participant One talked about a Christian group that he was associated with before going to seminary. He stated that this particular group taught that God would "give a [Bible] verse" before calling someone to ministry. While he disagreed with that position, he stated that he moved to another state for seminary and decided that he "was going to do this without a plan—just going based on faith."

This reliance on faith means that participants were not prepared for the realities of the church as a business. Participant 9 stated that the worst part of the church is that it is modeled as a corporate institution. He assumed that being a pastor would just involve studying and teaching the Bible. Participant Five was upset about how the church focused too much on programs. Participant Eight shared a story about his co-worker, fellow minister, and friend being fired from a church. Participant Eight said that he was surprised by, "How cold and HR it was. Even though, like I said, like the politics existed. But just seeing it behind the scenes. How you know, cold, and calculating. And the HR side of it was kind of gross and surprising."

The participants did not expect that they would have to take care of the business aspects of the ministry that ensured the finances of the church were met. Participant Eight hated worrying about the financial aspects and church attendance. Participant Four expressed frustration that he was doing everything to meet the growth matrix in the church, but he still had people not listen to his ideas and suggestions. Participant Seven stated congregants called for his resignation over trivial matters. He then got into the habit of having his wife read every email and text that he sent to ensure it could not be misconstrued.

There was a significant amount of ministry disillusionment by all the participants. Everyone in the study was disappointed or negatively surprised by some aspects of ministry. The common themes of each form of disillusionment centered on how the people in the church treated these

ministers. Participant Three said he had not previously considered that vocational ministry would involve dealing with toxic and hostile people from the congregation. Participant Five described his disillusionment from the people in the church by saying,

I think one of the things that was unexpected was, you kind of let your guard down and assume that, somehow when Christ comes into a person's life there's a lessening of sin... I didn't think it was gonna be a Country Club, but I had no clue that it was going to be, I mean, it's just wild. We're broken people and you can't conceive; you know. No mind can conceive it.

It is worth noting that the two minority participants brought up racism. The first one stated that humans are in the process of improving, so they bring with them things like racism and ethnic boundaries into religious organizations. He seemed surprised by racism and reported that it took him some time to realize it. Later, he stated that it was not people's fault, but instead, sinful nature is the blame for racism. The second minority candidate reported,

No one was calling. I did not receive one phone call. I don't think. I'm, being honest here, I don't think it was a race issue. I, I don't know. I don't know, but I had thought that it [race] would always been an advantage.... So, I don't, I don't, I don't, I'm not, I'm not convinced that race was an issue, maybe. Maybe at the senior, maybe some, maybe some senior positions, but I didn't want that anyway. So, I'm not sure why nothing opened up.

In addition to being surprised by the negative behavior of religious people, many participants were shocked that congregants were uninterested and not passionate about spiritual growth. Participant Four mentioned that while new church members were excited about change, he faced opposition from seasoned members who wanted things to stay the same. Dealing with entrenched congregants was something also highlighted by a participant with decades of vocational ministry. This participant felt discouraged by people's lack of sacrifice and selfishness.

The participants openly discussed their feelings of pain and disappointment with the vocational ministry. Participant One and his wife

experienced impropriety and abuse of pastoral power from their senior pastor. He tried to handle it according to what he believes the Bible taught by first personally going to the senior pastor, next he brought a witness with him, and finally he involved the church's lay leadership. Unfortunately, he was blackballed and rejected. As he reflected on the experience, he said,

So, despite all the training and seminary, I honestly didn't think. I do not know why I didn't think that (the senior pastor) would not lie or minimize or spin the situation because his job did depend on it. And like, "What was I thinking?" I thought somehow, especially with a witness there, that the truth would sort of come out in an uncomfortable way. And then it is beyond me to like smooth things over.

Participant One still considers himself an evangelical in belief but not culture or practice. He reported that he cannot currently enter a church without experiencing a panic attack and feeling threatened.

In addition to the commonality that the participants viewed vocational ministry, they also shared similarities about how they viewed themselves. They expressed feelings of shame, and at the same time viewed themselves as mavericks. Perhaps it is because of the participants' feelings of inadequacy that they try to embrace the role of someone who is different from the expected norm for Evangelical Christians. For example, their ways of being different include using profanity, drinking alcohol, going against conservative political candidates, not being overly religious, acting authentically, embracing progressive ideologies, or being divorced.

One way that shame emerged was through the participants expressing feelings of inadequacy and doubting their success. Many participants confessed that they are prone to second-guessing themselves. For example, Participant Three started questioning if he was genuinely earning good grades in seminary because a professor told him to leave his term paper on his desk, and he would get to it later. Participant Three later reported that he worries about offending God and messing up during a church service. Participant Four used self-deprecating humor throughout the interview. He voluntarily resigned from two different churches without having another job because he felt it was best for the church. He said,

When things were hellish at home, I resigned [from] the church... I thought that was the best thing for the church as a whole, for me to remove myself, nobody asked me to. I just

said, "Things are bad at home, and I don't need to try to lead a church with an unhealthy home life.

Participant Six reported that he never felt special, and his insecurities probably played a part in him pursuing vocational ministry. Participant Six also questioned himself and if he was good enough to become a minister. Participant One stated a few times in the interview that he doubted if he was worthy of being called to ministry. Later in the interview, Participant One made a distinction between himself and others who would potentially enter vocational ministry. He said, "It's just that I don't feel like I can do it right now, so it's not for me at the moment. Maybe I'm just, maybe I'm just too damaged. But for others, I wouldn't discourage them."

The participants discussed feeling pressure from their religious community and culture when they left or never entered vocational ministry after their theological training. Participant Two described this pressure in the following way,

Where when you make a decision to follow the Lord in full-time ministry, and you never go back. You don't budget, you don't do any of that stuff. You just trust the Lord to take care of things. And the minute you look back and go back and take a secular job, you are looked down upon pretty heavily. That you are not worthy of the Lord, that sort of thing. So that imprint in my upbringing, and in my mind, had a lot weighing on me when, I would say, I graduated.

Some expressed shame associated with not entering or leaving vocational ministry, while others reported feelings aligned with inadequacy. One way that the participants did this is that they all see themselves as different and in opposition to the cultural image of an evangelical minister. This ranges from a participant calling himself the "swearing pastor" to a different one who described himself as "not typical" and "not very pious," but instead "extremely authentic." Two of the participants made a point to mention they had a different political ideology from mainstream Evangelicals.

The most memorable interview where the participant exhibited a maverick type of attitude was the only in-person interview conducted. Participant Seven wanted to meet in-person at a place that was a brewery and café. He drank a few beers. At one point, he talked about "drifting away." Participant Seven pointed out that he was drinking a beer. Then he

said he signed a contract in seminary stating he would not drink alcohol. After he graduated, his denomination made him sign a similar contract. He recalled,

On our honeymoon, my wife and I had a drink while we were in Canada. And so, when I went to apply for support for our church plant, they asked, "Have you had alcohol in the last year?" And I answered "Yes" because it had been about six months before, right. And they told me, "Hey, we love everything you're doing. Come and reapply when you can answer "no" to this question.

Behaviors considered usual by most in society, like occasionally cursing, drinking a beer, changing careers, experiencing marital trouble, or having differing political views, are deviant and career-ending for many in vocational ministry. While most professions allow one to have boundaries between their personal and professional lives, the ministerial role blends the two. The people in this study seemed to embrace that they have an abnormal place where they are part of the evangelical circle but at the same time pushed away from it.

Resilience and Response to Adversity

The participants possessed a resiliency that allowed them to reframe their negative experiences and theological education in a new way. The two main ways they did this were through maintaining a high view of ministry and their view of calling. At the time of the interview, all participants demonstrated that they still have a very high view of ministry. The participants showed support for people interested in vocational ministry, some expressed an interest in pursuing vocational ministry in the future, and they all described a transcendence regarding ministry.

All the participants would encourage but warn those who want to enter vocational ministry. Two participants were supportive of those becoming ministers, but they expressed concerns about the seminaries' ability to prepare people for vocational ministry. These participants suggested alternative seminaries. Participant Five suggested that seminaries develop two tracks: one for traditional ministers and another for others interested in ministry. Participant Eight would encourage future ministers to receive theological training through mentors, church programs, or denominational resources, unless they wanted to be senior pastors or chaplains.

Participant Six discussed that he would encourage people to enter ministry, but he would emphasize how a significant amount of ministering involves being crushed and perseverance. Participant Seven would emphasize the difficulty of ministry and warn potential ministers, but also tell them that it is "definitely worth it."

Despite having left the ministry, several of the participants expressed an interest in returning to a vocational ministry career in the future. Participant Four shared a dream of moving away with his wife when he is 70 and having a ministry career in retirement. Participant Six talked about his dream of entering vocational ministry after becoming financially stable through his secular job. For most of the participants reentering vocational ministry would only occur after they had stability or means to engage in the sacrifices associated with ministry.

While many participants discussed pain throughout their interviews, three discussed their pain when asked about reentering vocational ministry. For example, Participant Nine expressed a deep longing to preach on a preaching team at a church, but he is also hesitant to do so from what he defines as the "hurt and pain—lingering hurt and pain" from his time in ministry. Participant Seven seemed hopeful that a vocational ministry opportunity could open in the future. However, his dreams dimmed when he shared a doubt that he would not reenter because it would take a miracle to happen for his wife to reenter that lifestyle. Participant One shared a mixture of his hope and pain by saying,

I have this idea in my brain that I will go back to it someday... I've been beaten back. And I don't know exactly who I am anymore in terms of, I don't believe what I used to believe in terms of praxis. But I don't have a path forward now to put that into practice again. Somehow to have a path to re-emerge. But somehow, I believe that I will. I'll come out of hiding, and I'll probably preach in obscurity.

All the participants described a transcendence while ministering to others that seemed reminiscent of an ex-athlete recalling when they were at their prime. Participant Three stated that ministering to others was, "An incredibly powerful sense that I can't fully describe ... There's a very sacred thing to it."

Other participants described the act of ministry as priceless, as the best of his life, and that he felt the "presence of God." Others loved seeing people grow and "get it," and still others marveled at seeing people's lives

change. Participant Nine described ministry in a positive sense that ministry gave him a “front-row” to see God working in people’s lives.

All the participants were from Evangelical seminaries, so it was not surprising that many emphasized preaching as a primary part of ministry. When speaking about preaching or teaching, they all referred to the Bible as “God’s Word.” Participant Four stated that the most enjoyable time of his ministry was preaching “God’s Word.” Participant One described becoming emotional while preaching and felt like he was “speaking like extemporaneously or something.” A Participant Nine mentioned that he could spend a significant amount of time studying and teaching “God’s Word.” Participant Seven enjoyed teaching congregants and helping them articulate Evangelical theological beliefs.

Since vocational ministry did not go as planned, they had to reconcile their ideas about calling, God, and success with their new situation. The participants primarily modified their original view of calling and focused on becoming successful in secular careers. While all participants saw a supernatural element to vocational calling, some emphasized the mystical more than others. Participant Five referred to calling as indescribable and similar to a salvation experience. Participant Seven described his call to ministry in supernatural terms that included an audible voice and signs through circumstances.

Some participants stated that their view of calling shifted. Previously, they viewed calling as either a yes or no, where a person was or was not called to ministry forever. Many moved from this all-or-nothing approach to see a calling as a journey. Participant Three described calling as a “kind of path” for a specific place or time. Participant Six described calling as an “overflow of a relationship with God” instead of a specific assignment. Some said that the calling changes and another stated that calling is using his talents, gifts, and resources to serve God in whatever capacity.

Several participants have reframed their secular profession as a ministry. While they are no longer compensated and their job titles are not ministry related, they see themselves as still very much in ministry. Participant Five, who works as a driver, reported that he considers his current job to be more a ministry position than what he did before in vocational ministry.

Participant One who works in management stated that he has started reframing his management job as pastoral work. He sees that managing people is similar to pastoring people, so he cares for them like a pastor does a congregant. Participant One now believes that he can have a more

significant impact on people's lives working in a secular field than pastoral ministry. After not getting a ministry job after graduating from seminary, Participant Two asked himself, "What is ministry?" His answer was that ministry was not limited to paid vocational service.

Since leaving vocational ministry, almost all of the participants are successful in their new careers. Table 2 below shows the current profession of the participants. The participants show a resiliency to adversity and use their abilities in other vocations.

Conclusion

Vocational ministers spend a significant amount of time and money getting credentialed in seminary, but we found that they seem unprepared for the realities of the job itself. While they argue that they have been called by God to do this work and believe they must make sacrifices to do so, they are unprepared for the daily operations of the church, the business aspects of running a church, the realities of pastoral counseling, and the exploitation of their labor. This exploitation includes low salaries and a lack of professional boundaries. When they leave the profession because of these structural factors, they experience intense guilt and a spiritual crisis. To cope, they reframe "ministry" to mean more than vocational ministry. They become what they define as mavericks, continuing to spread "the word of God" outside the boundaries of the career they prepared for.

Table 1 – Participants' Education

Participant	Seminary Degrees	Theological Graduate Hours	Non-Seminary Graduate Degrees or Hours
One	ThM	120	MS post-seminary
Two	ThM	120	EdD post-seminary
Three	MACM*	69	No
Four	MDiv, PhD	150	Hours in business, history
Five	MAR	60	No
Six	MDiv, MACE, MMFC	150	No
Seven	MDiv	96	MPSA pre-seminary
Eight	MABS, MACE**	90	JD post-seminary
Nine	ThM	120	PhD post-seminary
Total Seminary Graduate Hours		975	
Master's Degrees Earned		13	
Doctoral Degrees Earned		4	

*This respondent is three credit hours short of graduating with this degree.

**This respondent also completed an additional one-year chaplain residency.

Key to degree initials: EdD (Doctor of Education), JD (Juris Doctor), MABS (Master of Biblical Studies), MACE (Master of Christian Education), MACM (Master of Arts in Christian Ministry), MAR (Master of Arts in Religion), MDiv (Master of Divinity), MMFC (Master of Marriage and Family Counseling, MPSA (Master of Public Service Administration), MS (Master of Science, PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), ThM (Master of Theology).

Table 2 – Participants' Current Profession

Participant	Profession at the time of interview	Type of organization
One	Director Level Position	Multi-Million Dollar Company
Two	Senior Level Management	Education
Three	Sales Associate*	Retail
Four	Vocational Ministry**	Non-Profit
Five	Driver***	Self-employed
Six	Mid-Level Management	Multi-Billion Dollar Company
Seven	Senior Loan Officer	Mortgage Company
Eight	Attorney	Law Office
Nine	Professor	Education

* This respondent had this same position while he was going to seminary. He was the youngest respondent, and he is still in a discovery stage of life.

**This respondent recently reentered vocational ministry.

***This respondent was clear that he is a driver by choice and sees it as a ministry to others. He reports that he is independently wealthy from previous business deals.

***Wesley Cohoon** is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. He has earned a DMin, MS in Sociology, and an MDiv. He is an ordained minister, a former Board-Certified Chaplain, and a Certified Clinical Sociologist.*

***Jessica Gullion** is an Associate Professor of Sociology and the Associate Dean of Research at Texas Woman's University. She earned a PhD in Sociology, MA in Sociology, and a BA in English.*